

Fury of Balavid

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Fury of Balavid

Maps

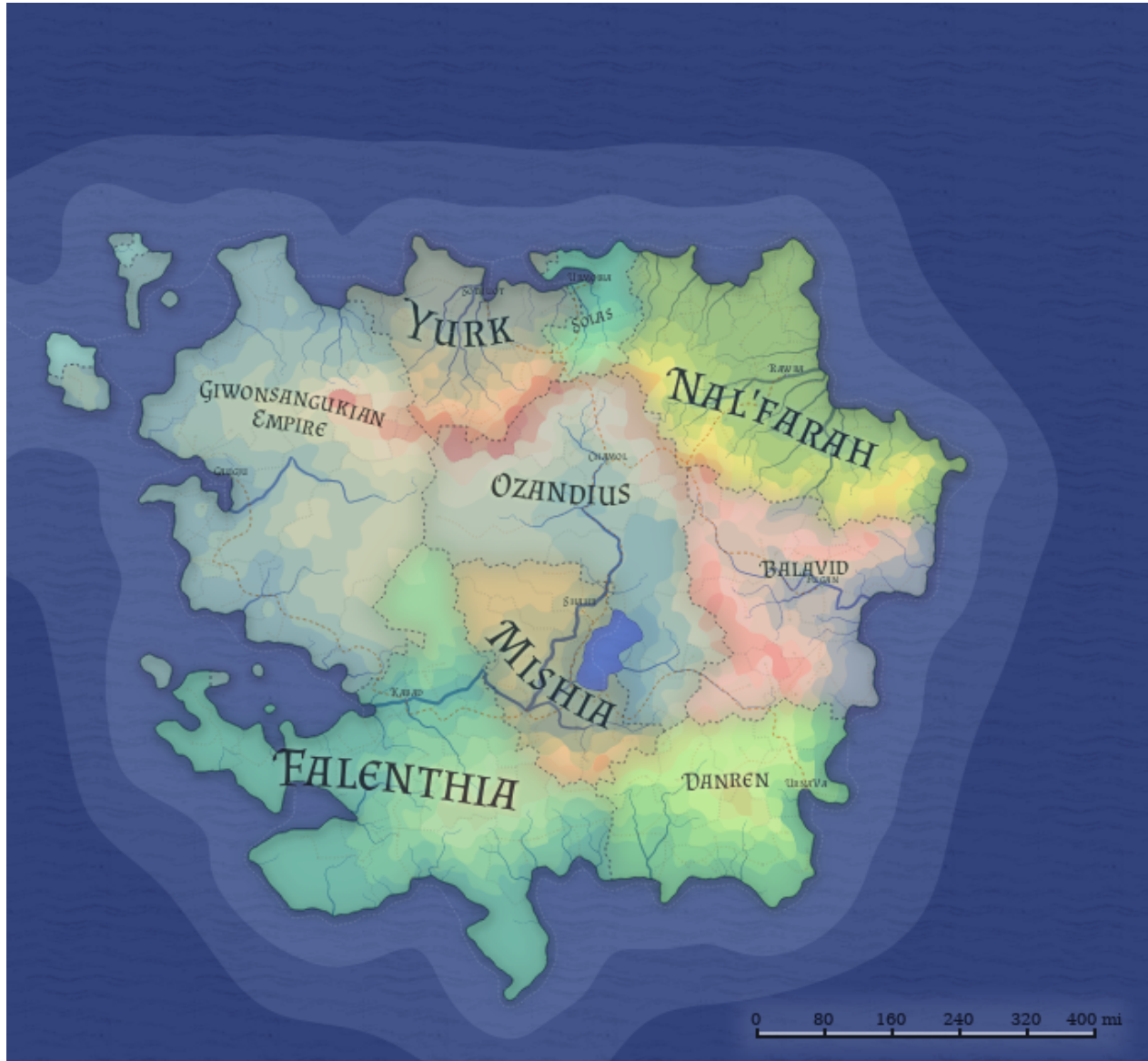


Figure 1: The Continent

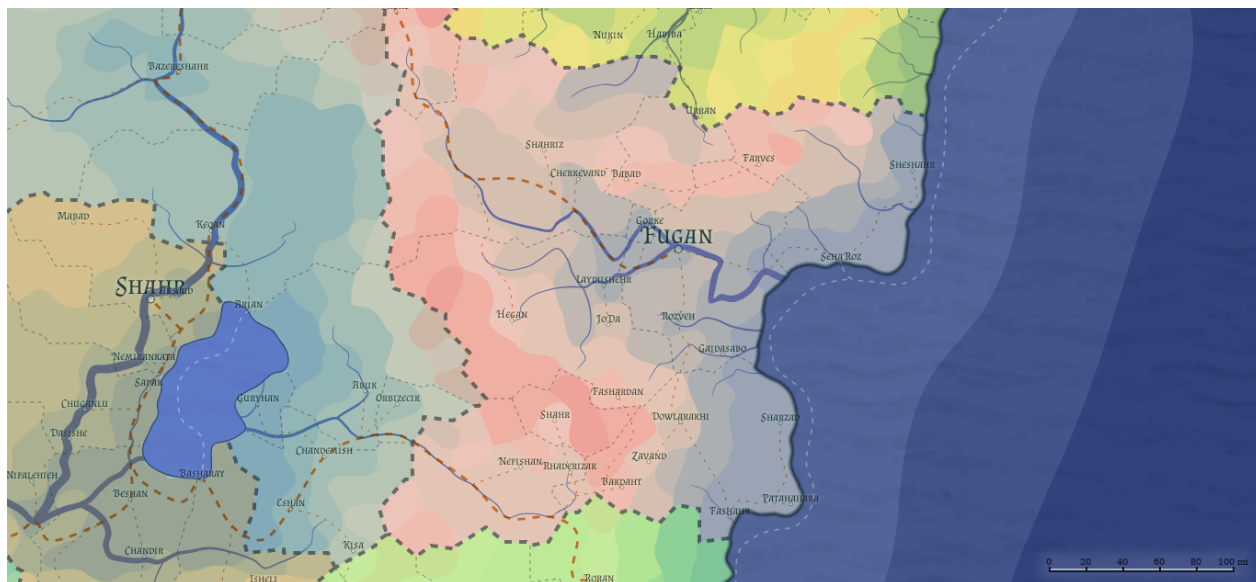


Figure 2: Balavid

Prologue

Dyys

A woman stood, overlooking the burned out land. Her hair was blood red, and braided. It hung down her back, almost passed her knees. She wore simple work pants, and a dirt-stained loose shirt. Around her waist was a scaled belt.

She sighed heavily, looking at the ruins of the farm. The fires had scorched through here badly. The calamity. The skies had burned, and poisonous stones had fallen from the sky. The entire mortal world had nearly been lost in the chaos. The kingdoms were surviving, so far. However, most farms were like this. No livelihoods. Nothing to feed the family, let alone ship to the cities and other survivors.

She leaned on the fence post, "It's like this, from here to Nal'farah. Everywhere I've been. Hells, half the cities I've been to were in worse shape. Most were empty. A few had bandits, but even they were starving."

The farmer nodded grimly, "I hear it isn't much better in the cities that survived the calamity. We have to stick together, afterwards. . . I can offer you a bed, but not much more than that. The well went dry two days ago. I think one of the impacts broke the clay layer."

Dyys nodded, "That sounds about right. Well. I think. . . I'll help you."

The farmer glanced at her, "Eh?"

She jumped over the fence, and crouched down besides a spot in the dead soil. She put a hand over it, "You planted seed. You were hopeful."

"Ground's shit." The farmer sighed, "There's no nutrients. No water. Nothing will ever grow here again. Cherkevand is dead."

She stood up slowly, holding her hand with spread fingers. "I don't know about that."

The man started in shock, staring at the single wheat stalk tickling her hand. She smiled at him, "I know mages have a bad rep. But in times like these. . ."

The farmer shook his head, "In times like these, I don't care. Mages fight wars. If you ain't a fighter, and now you're healing the land. . . I couldn't be happier to have you under my roof. Can you do it again?"

Dyys sighed, looking out across the field, "Sure. It'll take me a couple days to revive this field. Maybe a week for the surrounding ones as well. I reckon a month, and this whole farm might be running."

The farmer laughed, "You're hopeful. We got no water. A month, we'll all be dead or gone."

"I can fix that too." She shrugged, holding her hand over the new plant. Droplets of water fell from her fingertips. They glistened as they splashed onto the parched ground. "There's plenty of water in the air. Dragging it out isn't so hard."

The man nodded slowly, "You been doing this? From Nal'farah to here?"

She nodded, "For a roof over my head, and food on my plate. That's all I ask for. I'll provide the food."

He smiled at her, "You're welcome to stay, stranger."

"Call me Dyys." She grinned at him.



Prologue

Bel

She cracked her back, leaning upright and looking across the field. The blackened soil seemed to have been charred at least two feet down across the entire farm. She was caked in mud up to her waist, and had spent three days turning it so far, with little to show. She didn't have much of a choice.

If they lost the farm, they lost a chance to live. If they abandoned it, they'd just be moving somewhere else with the same set of problems. Or worse ones. This was the result of the calamity. Of infighting between the gods. Humanity paid the price, whilst the gods sat back and did as little as they could get away with. Sending out sisters from their temples who didn't know a potato from a yam.

"Bel!"

She turned around to see the farmer waving to her. Jean. This was his farm. She'd worked it since she was a little girl, but it was his livelihood, and his bloodlines work. They had established it here in the hills. If the farm really was lost, then he would be taking it harder than anyone.

She flashed a sequence of symbols in the air, and he smiled, "We have a visitor. She... Can help."

Bel frowned. She didn't like the sound of that at all.

Desperate times and desperate people did not tend to come with solutions whose prices were worth paying.

Prologue

Lilibeth

“Praetorian.” The centurion said, bowing as she passed him by. She barely acknowledged him. Not today. Today was bad day to be a member of the Balavidian military. Today was a day they prepared to die. Not for any glory, but for a pointless cause. At the behest of a mad mage.

She paused as arrived at the doors to the tower, as the guards in front of her braced their weapons together. She raised an eyebrow, “I am Praetor Lilibeth. Prince Vanadreer summoned me.”

One of the guards stared passed her, obviously terrified out of his wits. “The Wizard Carmichael has ordered that no one enter without his explicit permission.”

Technically, the wizard did outrank her. However, the prince was behind those doors, and the wizard was quite mad. That wasn’t a combination she was particularly fond of. She was responsible not just for the safety of the prince, but for the whole of Balavid. She would have to make a choice.

The doors swung inwards as she made up her mind. She glared at Carmichael. He’d been testing her. Again. Testing just how far she was willing to go, to do the right thing.

“You will never break me, sir.”

He grinned at her, “Quite possibly true. Let her in.”

The guards moved aside and she breezed in, giving the prince a once over. He was lying in a chair, bored, and possibly asleep. Or drugged. Or both.

Carmichael closed the doors behind her, “I believe I have found a cure to our problems following the calamity.”

The prince started awake, wiping drool from the corner of his mouth, “Carmichael? Ah. Lilibeth. Are you up to a raid?”

Her face darkened, “A raid? Since when did either of you possess military knowledge?”

“We don’t.” Vanadreer grinned, “So we summoned you. Here. Look at the map. I think we’ve found a dwergaz recharging station, still in one piece.”

She walked over, looking down at the map grimly, “A raid on a dwergaz fortress. Brave. Shahriz. That’s a couple days.”

Carmichael put a hand on her shoulder, “For the glory of Balavid!”

Prologue

Alexus

She squeezed the water out of her hair as she stepped onto the beach slowly. The salt was going to make it go all frizzy. Just another irritation to add to a long line of things that was annoying her today.

“Are you okay?”

She looked over at the human running up to her. The man looked to the sea and back to her, “Did you wash up from a sea-wreck? Where’s your ship?”

Apparently this was no a common swimming point. Unsurprising, considering the rocks she had passed on the way in, and the confusing array of currents she had fought. She could not afford this sort of attention. Especially not from creatures as weak and stupid as these.

She looked the man up and down, “Talan an sal kan sina?”

The man frowned, “Is that some foreign language? Do you speak the Common Tongue at all? I thought everyone did.”

She understood it well enough. She did not particularly feel like soiling herself with it, however. It appeared that he didn’t even recognise the language she spoke. It was disappointing that mortals had forgotten her kind so quickly. So easily. Despite the horrors that her kind continued to inflict upon them.

Alexus smiled sweetly and the man. He stepped closer, “Seriously, are you okay?”

Her fist slammed into his face. The skull caved, shattering. Fragments of bone plunged into the soft tissues of the brain as her fist continued to pass through and deeper into him. The brain could only compress so much before it attempted to find other ways exiting the crushed bowl that was the man’s skull.

She shook the blood off her hand as the man fell backwards onto the sand.

She walked passed him. Add another irritation to her life.

Everything, caused by one woman.

Dyys.

Prologue

Wrodin

The soil was cool beneath his feet as he stood up. As he stood up in his hole under a hill. This was all he had now, since the disaster at Eldrasa. Since he had faced off against F'rir, expecting to bury her and instead found that Sarin was waiting and prepared for him in every regard.

He lost his divinity. He lost his magic. He lost his eternal soul.

All he had left was a single mortal life to live, and the moment he started trying to live it the world was nearly destroyed in flames and fire. All he had was a fragile moment. He was just more collateral damage in this brutal world that was ruled by creatures so big and so powerful they couldn't stop to care how many died by their hands and actions.

He emerged from the hovel, standing on the charred hillside, overlooking the two shacks that passed for houses down in the valley below. A half dozen stubborn workers trying to bring the soil back to life, to save themselves and the world they had known. The world that was already dead. There was no going back to before the calamity. That future was dead and buried.

The man who had once been a god looked at the houses in surprise, seeing a stranger sitting on the porch, laughing with Jean. She wasn't just a stranger here. Plenty had passed through in recent days, leaving the kingdom. This one was different. She had power. More magic than he had yet to see in a mortal, even in his days as a god. Even Vastras had not that much power in her hands.

Wrodin smiled slowly. He knew what she was. She could be useful to him.

Fury of Balavid

Dyys

She rocked in the chair slowly, looking out across the field as the sun set slowly. It was a nice life, this. It was quiet. She got to bring hope to people with little. Got to see people hanging on even when they had no right to.

A good sight better than her past.

Most people didn't ask about it. Partially because they were terrified of her. Partially because they all assumed that mages were nothing more than weapons of war. She was so much worse than a weapon of war.

She picked up her glass of water slowly, pulling the heat out of it and causing it to frost up. She sipped the cold water appreciatively, and looked at the work she'd given herself.

It wasn't quite as easy as she'd made it look. Growing a seed from nothing was easy enough. The energy it needed came from her own body. However, that wasn't exactly a self-sustaining method. The field would still be dead and unable to grow anything. She needed to heal the actual magical matrix of the land.

The calamity wasn't just a moment in time. It wasn't just fire and poison smoke. The world itself had been destroyed. Whether that damage could actually be repaired was a total unknown. Last time this had happened there hadn't been a world to save afterwards.

There might not be hope for these people. All she could give them might just be a false hope. She could heal the farm, maybe. It had been getting more and more difficult as she moved further inland, towards Ozandius. Yet, even if she healed the farm, their world might well be doomed. The dead soil was just one of many symptoms. The continent was beginning to shift. The foundations deep within the core of their world had begun to degrade.

A few hundreds years and nothing might be alive.

She sipped the cold water again. These people didn't have long lifespans anyway. It would be the problem of their children's children, and their children. By then, their creativity might have actually lead to a solution. They were an imaginative people. In another life, she would have found the ingenuity of some of their desperate measures inspirational.

Now, she just found it depressing.

"Seems like a big job." Jean said stepping onto the porch and placing a bread roll by her. It was grainy, overly-fluffy, and mostly terrible. Not that she could expect much else in a place like this.

She smiled, "Thanks. It is. But it always is. This is what I've signed up for."

He sat in a rocking chair, "There's about a dozen people who live in or around here. They'll all be grateful, but there really isn't much more than that we can do."

"I just want to be able to go my way." She smiled at the sunset, "I'm not in this to seek any bloody fortune. That sounds like more effort than it'd be worth. I can stay for a while, do my work, and move on. That's all I've ever asked from this world."

Jean frowned, "Sounds a lonely sort of life."

Dyys laughed, "I could do with some lonely. I was surrounded by people for most of my life."

"It must have been hard when the calamity hit."

Dyys winced. She hadn't meant for it to come out that way. "I was lucky. The sea boiled, but the island didn't really get hit."

Jean paused, “An island? I guess you do look foreign. Never seen anyone with your kind of hair before.”

Dyys ran a hand through her brilliant red locks, “Not really. It’s... A sign of what I am. A mage. People born where I am get... Attributes. If they get magic. I stood out at home just as much as I do in Balavid.”

Jean shrugged, “So if your home wasn’t... Destroyed by the calamity... Why leave? There’s not a lot out here.”

“Exactly.” Dyys smiled, “There’s no one here. Everyone is grateful for whatever I do. There’s no one screaming at me to hurry up, no one demanding I do the impossible. There aren’t thirty odd people with their own demands when you get home... It’s quiet.”

Jean laughed softly, “Sounds like quite the family.”

She sipped her water, cooling the glass again. She put it down and picked up the roll. She held it aloft in her hand, and glared at it. There was a brief spasm of motion, and the bread seemed to collapse as if it were deflating slowly. It fell into a flat shape, and she flicked it into the air, catching it again and grinning. “Also, I get to do stuff like this without being yelled at for being wasteful of magic.”

Jean stared in surprise, “That’s... A chocolate chip biscuit. How did you do that?”

“Equivalency.” Dyys sighed, “I need food to make other food. It gets complicated quickly. But... It does mean I get to indulge. At home the Mark would probably have cut a finger or two off for this.”

The farmer winced, “Not fans of magic, I take it.”

Dyys shrugged, “Nah. They loved magic. They just had... Rules about when and how you could use it. Like, a lot of rules. Like they thought it would run out or something. A bit weird.”

The farmer sighed, “So you’re running away from home. I guess I can’t complain, but are you sure that’s what you want?”

It was. Emphatically. She couldn’t begin to explain how much better her life was here, as far as from those psychopaths as she could get. Who cuts off a finger just for making a damn cookie? Even she knew that couldn’t be normal behaviour. She’d been surprised by how rare murder happened around these people, but not that torture wasn’t the daily life for most.

Dyys grinned, “You don’t want to go down that road. I guess I should get some rest. I’ll start first thing.”

Jean nodded dispassionately, “If you need any help, Bel should be able to. I’ll be over next door for most of the day.”

Dyys frowned, “Bel... She speaks sign, doesn’t she? I don’t.”

Jean shrugged, “She tends to get her point across. I’m sure you’ll be fine.”

He was right. She wasn’t going to need any help. But it would be interesting to learn to communicate with someone like her. Where Dyys came from, Bel would have had her throat slit a long time ago for being just the tiniest bit different. It wasn’t even the disability. Most of her kind wouldn’t see it as a disability, just a difference. If they didn’t worship magic so intensely, the magical attributes would have made sure she had died in her crib.

Bel

She sat up with a start. The sun was yet to rise, but she'd heard someone standing outside.

She grabbed her belt and flew to her feet, strapping on the sword and she burst out the door, one hand on the hilt.

She paused as she saw the mage stretching. The woman turned around with deliberate slowness, and then covered her mouth and tried not to laugh.

Bel made an angry sign.

The woman shrugged, "Sorry. No idea what you just said. At all. But I am guessing I woke you. Because you're wearing an unbuttoned shirt and a sword and... Nothing else. At all. The confidence is refreshing."

Bel rolled her eyes, and told the mage she was an idiot.

The mage shrugged, "Anyways... I have work to do. I'll be capturing sunlight this morning. Try not to let your shadow cross mine."

The woman turned around, and began to stretch again. Maybe it wasn't stretching. Maybe they really were preparations for magic. Either way, Bel was irritated. There had been a dozen bandit attacks in the last month. She didn't like getting surprised like this.

She headed back inside, but knew that sleeping for another hour or two would be completely out of the question. The adrenaline was flowing. She undid her belt and dropped the sword onto a chair. She opened the cupboards out of habit. She didn't need to. She knew what she had for breakfast this morning. Nothing. Just like the day before. And the day before that.

She sighed, and grabbed a bucket, walking out into the yard again. She paused at the well, hooking on the bucket and began to lower it. The thing creaked under the strain as the bucket lowered slowly. She half expected to hear a dull thunk, like every other morning. Instead she heard a soft splash as the bucket hit the water. So the mage really had managed to fix it, at least in the short term.

She lowered the weighted bucket, hearing the familiar sound as water rushed into the void.

Bel smiled softly, and then began to wind the bucket up again, when she heard the mage behind her. "So... Modesty isn't your thing?"

She turned to her, and signed that the mage was an absolute idiot asking questions if she couldn't understand the answers. The mage frowned slowly, "So... This sign. That's idiot, right?"

Bel blushed in surprise and nodded sheepishly.

The mage grinned at her, "I know I can't speak to you. It sucks. But... I am a quick study. You have to be, to be a mage. Magic is about messing with the world. It doesn't like that and tries to mess you back. It keeps you on your toes. I'll pick it up. Especially if you sit there tossing insults my way."

Bel sighed heavily, and made the sign for "Sorry."

The mage shrugged, "I deserve it. I haven't bothered to learn to sign before now."

Bel frowned, looking at the woman with blood-red hair. She was different than anyone she had met. Not just her irrepressible friendliness. Bel got the feeling that was just something the mage projected for everyone to see. That underneath the friendliness was someone who could gut you and

feel no guilt at all. No, what was different about the mage was... She didn't see Bel as different. She saw herself as different instead.

Bel waved a hand at the well, and then continued to raise the bucket.

The mage shrugged, "I could use a drink."

Bel laughed silently, and then patted the top of her head.

The mage blinked, "Ah. Shower? Nah. I'll purify the water. I think today is going to be a hot day. I'll need the water."

Bel looked to the horizon, where the sun's first rays were only just appearing. She nodded. It felt like it would be a hot one. Not that it would be any different than any of the other days recently.

She dragged the heavy bucket out of the well. The mage took the bucket from her easily, holding it aloft with one hand for a moment, before lowering it again. "Once you're done with your shower, mind getting me a glass? I'll be in the field."

The woman walked away, and Bel looked down at the crystal clear water. It hadn't been like that when she'd pulled it out. It had been mostly dirt and dead bugs. The mage made magic look so easy. As if she were trying to impress Bel with how easily she could manipulate the world. Pick a fight with the natural order of things.

Bel smiled, and hung her shirt up nearby. She poured some of the water into a nearby trough, and placed the rest aside for later. She touched the trough, trying to guess how much of a shock the cold water would be to her. Instead, it was warm to the touch. Hot, even. It wouldn't be getting that hot from down below, not unless something had rapidly changed recently. It had to be the mage. Giving her a warm shower.

Bel rolled her eyes. The woman was definitely trying to impress her.

It wasn't going to work.

The mage was a traveller, she'd be gone before she'd learned how to get along with Bel. She wasn't an easy one. She hadn't lived an easy life. She didn't let anyone get close to her, not by choice. What she was, was a hard worker, and a decent fighter. Those two skills came in useful in places like this, so far from the civilised world.

She poured the water over her, blowing the water out of her face. She twisted her hair to the side and wrenched it. The water drained slowly, and Bel reached for her shirt.

"Well, what is this?"

Bel spun around, her eyes steeling as she saw the two bandits. They were rougher than usual. Dust covered from travel, each with a single knife in hand. Their boots were worn out, and their coats looked like they were being held together by luck, hope and spit. This would make them desperate.

One of them pointed at her with his knife, "I think you should come along with us, quiet mind."

That wasn't a choice. She couldn't scream for help. Usually she didn't much care, but right now the ability to make an indecent amount of noise would come in extremely helpful.

There was a flash of red.

Bel's eyes widened in shock as she saw the mage holding one of the bandit's by his throat. The mage didn't say anything. She didn't threaten him. She didn't gloat over him. There was silence, and then the man fell to the ground with a sickening crack.

The other bandit tried to slash towards the mage, but the knife turned to steam in his hand. The mage looked at him with a deep anger. A hatred. Bel swallowed nervously, taking her shirt without turning her eyes and pulling it on.

The mage punched the bandit, just once. She heard the bones shatter, and the man hit the ground in a gruesome sea of red.

The woman shook her head, “Kregstad. That hurt. I guess I am tired.”

Then she just turned and started walking back towards the field.

Bel turned to follow her. The mage had just killed two people, without hesitation. Without even bothering to talk to her opponents. She didn’t try and negotiate her way out of things. She just killed them. As if death was something that she dealt out on a regular basis. It made some sense. Mages were supposed to be weapons of war. Used by the army. Conscripted as children and forced to tear people apart.

She was right. There was something disturbingly violent underneath that kind demeanour.

She glanced back at the two dead bodies and sighed. Now she had more work. By the time she’d got dressed, the flies would be gathering. The predators from the hills wouldn’t be long after that. If she didn’t hurry the corpses would be stripped bare before she could bury them.

She heard a distant snap, and looked over. The mage had snapped her fingers, but it didn’t look like she was trying to get her attention.

Bel turned back, and smiled.

The clothes, weapons and pocket contents of the two bandits were now sitting in neat piles. She picked them up and walked towards the farmhouse.

Lilibeth

She bit into a hunk of crystallised wheat, leaning on the balcony as she watched the column running drills below her. She wasn't impressed with what she was seeing. These rejects were supposed to guide a prince through a dwergaz labyrinth? A place of mechanisms and death? They were rookies. Their deaths were guaranteed. All she'd be able to do is keep them alive for a short time. How short was the question. Would they be able to protect the prince?

She launched herself over the balcony, landing in the dirt and mud with a crash, food still in her mouth. She walked up to one of the rookies practising sword skills, and nodded at him. He knew what she meant, she'd done this a number of times in the past.

He flashed his sword towards her, aiming for a glancing blow, trying to unsteady her. Not a bad tactic, considering the ankle-deep mud she found herself in. She deflected the sword with a sharp kick, and then moved passed it and headbutted him before he could recover. He dropped instantly.

Lilibeth bit of the piece of wheat and took the rest in her hand. She glanced around chewing slowly, "Anyone want to tell me what he did wrong?"

A timid auxiliary spoke up, "He assumed you were unarmed?"

She smiled and nodded, "Close. He assumed I was defenceless. You're not practising swordplay, children. Your practising death. Never forget that. You do not hold back. You do not joust for fun with your opponent. If I see any of you holding back again, I will execute you on the spot. Begin again."

She turned and moved back to her vantage point, finishing her breakfast.

Carmichael appeared from the shadows, stroking his grey beard, "They're just kids, Praetor. Most of them are auxiliaries. They haven't even earned their citizenship."

"They're what we have." Lilibeth said angrily, "Since the calamity took the First and Second Legions, this is all we can spare for your suicidal run at glory and power. I'll be damned if the prince dies. For that, I need men, not boys who will soil themselves at the first movement of the enemy."

Carmichael sighed, "I have worse news on that front."

"Fuck."

The wizard smiled at her, "Succinctly put. There's a Wachterin still active in the ruin."

She had not sworn nearly bad enough for the circumstances. A mechanised Guardian, that was widely believed to be responsible for the disappearance of the dwergaz. The Wachterin was nigh unstoppable. There was only one battle she knew of where humans had triumphed. Three Legions had drawn a Wachterin into the open outside a ruin, and overwhelmed it with their numbers, finally defeating it with a manuballista. All the same... From the three hundred men and women who had attacked it, only five had returned home.

She had to get a prince and a wizard, in and out of maze guarded by a thing like that. They wouldn't be able to attack it. They would have to rely on stealth, keeping their wits about them. Except none of these idiots had any wits to hand. She could disarm and kill any of them before they blinked. They would not be able to function as an effective unit.

"This is a death sentence, mad mage." Lilibeth growled, "These men cannot handle a Wachterin. They would prevent us even hiding the prince from it."

Carmichael nodded grimly, "I'm aware. I'm working on something that might give me an edge

to distract long enough for you to get the prince passed. . . But so far I'm lead to conclude whoever distracts it will die. And there are not two of me, nor even an apprentice mage strong enough for me to sacrifice them. They won't survive long enough. I will continue to work on the problem, and it will be my problem. However, you do need to be aware."

She rolled her eyes. He didn't need to spell it out. She wasn't an idiot. She could take two seconds to understand the implications of a statement. She could also guess that he might decide to sacrifice her instead of himself, if circumstances permitted it. Her life, and the lives of her men, meant nothing to the wizard. His own life was of greatest import. Even if that meant killing the prince.

"They're not ready." Lilibeth growled angrily, "Not nearly ready. This mission is madness."

"We don't have time to wait." Carmichael snapped angrily, "It is draining me of all my reserves just to keep the King's Field alive. If we were to wait a single month, there would not be food enough for this pathetic half-legion to get us to the cave in question. I don't throw their lives away without good reason, Praetor. I know you think little of me. I am not so stupid as to waste their lives. Sacrifice must mean something. Even for a wizard as removed from things as myself, I expect a sacrifice to be an investment. I am invested in this venture succeeding. If it does not. . . A death in a dwergaz cave seems somewhat preferable to dying of starvation as peasants try and knock the castle doors down."

She looked sideways at him, at his red face. He was passionate enough. Though they still disagreed on the exact definition of sacrifice. "Carmichael, I have to rely on you for this, as so many other ventures. I may not like you, but I trust you well enough."

The man relaxed slightly, "I hope so. We're all the kingdom has right now. Where's the other Praetor?"

"Patrolling." Lilibeth sighed, "Praetor Aurili left a couple hours ago. We saw smoke on the horizon. A village burning. It may have been a bandit raid, or the beginnings of rebellion. . . Or even an accident. Time will tell. Aurili will keep the peace. She always has."

Carmichael relaxed further and she had to restrain herself. The man was obsessed with bedding her compatriot. Which was very much a lost cause. Aurili had sworn a vow of celibacy many years prior to one of the gods. She wasn't about to disappoint Wrodin by prostrating herself on the bed of a wizard. That was just inviting chaos to come and enter the world, and Kao'el had done that far too often in the past.

"Do you serve any gods, Praetor?" Carmichael asked, revealing again how he rifled through the minds of others without any respect for position or permission.

Lilibeth nodded slowly, "Yes, wizard. I do."

He leaned on the banister, "I guess that's as much as I'm going to get."

"Not at all." Lilibeth smiled, and drew a necklace from inside her leather cuirass, showing him the symbol hanging at the end, "I just wanted you to ask."

Carmichael touched it gently to position it for a better look, and swore instantly.

He danced around swinging his smoking fingers around as Lilibeth laughed and tucked it away again, "Meria'el, if you were still wondering."

She didn't turn, but she could feel the wizard's glare drilling into the back of her skull. Meria was a goddess of some significance, to those who practised magic. She wasn't like Sarin, inspiring

paladins to seek out destroy those who used it. She was indifferent, so long as those who practised it went nowhere near her, or any that belonged to her.

The necklace was a charm of sorts. It protected her from the immediate effects of magic. The secondary effects, like the ground melting or fire burning through the air, weren't effected and left to her to defend against. She found it useful, though it had never been why she'd sworn her life to Meria. She had found the gods sympathetic ear, and found the philosophy of how Meria proposed life should be... Hopeful.

Meria expected those that served her would live their lives to the best of their ability, no matter what it was. The one value that Meria held above all others was the will to survive. She was a god of artisans. In whatever you did, if you excelled, then you had her attention. If you sought it out. To the goddess, magic was cheating. Cheapening life to undercut the value of your own.

Lilibeth had been a painter when she'd first found Meria.

Now she was a Praetor, reporting only to the Commander of Legions, and to the King himself. She had excelled, as she always had. She was proud of it, of this work she had done in the name of her goddess.

She was also highly amused that Meria would burn the wizard.

Carmichael leaned backwards against the railing, "Meria'el. That was childish."

Lilibeth rolled her eyes, "So is expecting to succeed. Expect death, wizard. These boys don't have time enough to grow up."

"You think it'll just be me and you, in the end?" He asked cautiously.

She sighed heavily, "No. I expect to die standing over the corpse of the prince. I expect you to die long before then."

Carmichael laughed at the insult, not realising that it had been her frank assessment of the situation. That she really did expect them all to die almost immediately. That she expected to make a final stand to defend the prince's lifeless corpse before they got to the end of the first corridor.

She had been to a dwergaz ruin before. Nobody else here had.

The wizard sighed, "You and Praetor Aurili were promoted after an incursion into a ruin? Weren't you?"

"Yes." Lilibeth sighed, hating that he was still reading her mind.

The wizard glared, "And? What happened? What can we expect?"

"Anything." Lilibeth winced, "The walls and floors are made of adaptive magic. The elements themselves are the traps. The air could turn toxic. The floor could become a string of razor wire as the roof descends. The traps are set, they rarely change on the fly. But they can be anything you can imagine. You progress through them by not dying. By lucking out, or having the knowledge of an explorer who lucked out before you."

Carmichael winced, "The traps are set. What about the automatons?"

"Few weaknesses, many strengths." Lilibeth shivered, remembering screaming in the dark as spiders arcing lightning had clambered over her. Remembered dragging the torn apart corpse of her commander through the dark, as she was chased.

Carmichael blanched, covering his mouth. He'd obviously seen what she remembered. "The only way to stop a spider, is your domain, wizard. Overcharge the crystal inside them, and they

explode. You can't drain it. Well... No wizard has survived who tried. Cursed or some crap like that. The dwergaz weren't stupid."

The mad mage nodded slowly, sucking in lungfuls of air, "You became commander after that?"

"There was no one else left alive to lead." Lilibeth said bitterly, "It wasn't a choice. All they had to give me were auxiliaries. They had me, and Aurili. They made her Centurion and myself the Commander, because of a coin toss. They also decided to keep us and not bury us with our comrades at a coin toss. We failed our mission. We were unable to retrieve the book from the library."

Carmichael snapped to attention, "What book?"

"The same one I assume the prince wants you to collect in secret, this time." Lilibeth replied coldly.

The wizard smiled slowly and spread his hands, "He hasn't given me any order."

The lie was blatant. Inviting her to talk about something the king had forbidden her to. She rolled her eyes and turned back to watching the troops drilling. "Rotate!"

The each ran to the next activity, and began to drill again. It was something Aurili had instituted, years ago when she was still a Centurion. No Balavidian soldier should feel unfamiliar with another weapon, or in another situation. They must be able to adapt if they were to survive.

If she thought about it, that fateful day when everyone else had died in a frozen cave to the north, that was when Balavid's army had been remade. The two Praetors had been forged then. They had only become stronger, and more wilful, since. The army was a reflection of the lessons they had learned there. Lessons that had allowed them to keep Ozandius and Nal'farah at bay. Made men and women able to oppose the weapon of war that was a mage.

Both the bordering nations had plenty of mages in their armies. Slaves in the case of Ozandius, bred from birth to kill or be killed. Men and women who looked like they had no souls. Who acted like they had no eternity to look forward to. Who feared no hell. They simply summoned destruction at the will of their masters, turning everything to ash.

She had fought too many of those for one lifetime. She saw their eyes sometimes, when she slept. Yet, she and Aurili had been the ones to teach the others how to survive. How to cut down the mages. They had managed to secure the independence of Balavid in the blood of mages. There were plenty who served Balavid as well. One or two of her auxiliaries were mages by birth. However, Ozandius had bred an army of them. Isolating their magical inheritance and killing those who were born without it.

Magic-born were terrified of Ozandius. Terrified they might be forced to join their endless slaughter. It had lead to the creation of the city-state, Calis, hundreds of years ago. A city that had now been destroyed by magic. The magic of the Fae.

The birth of a new god. That's what the temples were saying had happened at Calis. Lilibeth felt like it was a half-truth. Something much worse than that had happened there. Something even the gods didn't want to talk about. Ascendance didn't have to come with wide scale slaughter and destruction. Maybe one of the gods had tried to prevent it, and caused a tear in reality. Maybe it was something worse.

Neither she, nor Aurili, would allow it to happen here. They had trained for this. Trained for when the world ended.

Carmichael smiled at her, "You know, you have a fascinating psyche, Praetor."

Her fist met his face with hesitation, knocking him off his feet. She heard the shuffle as one of his apprentices appeared from a wall, preparing a spell. She motioned her head towards Carmichael, where a curved blade was pushing against his throat, "Back down, apprentice."

Carmichael raised a hand, "Do as she says, Tomas."

The young man faded against the wall again, disappearing from sight. Lilibeth sheathed her dagger, and turned back to her recruits. The wizard stood up slowly, rubbing his jaw, "Well, I'm glad you're on our side."

"I serve Balavid, not you." She corrected him. She wasn't on his side. She never would be.

Alexus

She sat by the table, legs crossed and sitting on it, eating the food slowly, with disinterest. The flavour was something akin to the sea air. She wasn't certain why anyone would enjoy something like this, but it seemed to be the staple of the few people gracing this town, so close to the sea.

She'd ask why it was the food of choice, but of the people bleeding out on the ground around her, she hadn't left any alive. It was ridiculous how fragile these humans were. She'd managed to punch right through the spine of one of the people by accident. She'd held back, only meaning to wind him. These were the creatures that her target was choosing to live amongst?

It made no sense to her. They were weak. They were stupid. They exalted their cultures and religions, without realising the doom that they brought in their wake. They were unimaginative. After witnessing her murder one of their own kind without effort, they all tried to get her. She'd proven that she was unequivocally beyond their strength, but they'd all chosen to fight. Even chosen to waste energy on screaming insults, warning her they were about to attack.

It was pathetic.

Her fangs crunched on another of the strange yellow pieces. At least the food was filling, even if it exhibited signs of greed. These people seemed to enjoy their vices. To seek them out in their daily lives. It made so little sense to her. They knew that their vices would be repaid to them over a thousandfold when they died, and yet they did it all the same. Wasting the few precious moments they had before their inevitable deaths.

Her eyes flashed angrily as a seat opposite was pulled back and someone sat down in it.

The man smiled at her slowly, "Well. This is a surprise. Why are you here? And what will it take to send you back?"

Alexus glared at him, "Begone, mortal."

"I'm not mortal. And I'm not human."

She rolled her eyes and looked more carefully at him. He certainly appeared human. He had the general shape. Yet, he was right. His aura was somewhat impressive. Actually, she was lying. His aura belied a power that might have been equal to the Mark. This might be the ruler of this particular realm, if it had one. His eyes however, gave her pause. She'd never seen eyes like those before. They made her feel nostalgic for home. They felt like her home's atmosphere. A world of endless torture.

"What are you?"

He sighed. "Answer one of my questions, I'll answer yours."

Alexus sighed and dropped her legs off the table, "I'm hunting. One of ours is here. Somewhere."

The man nodded slowly, "I know. For the most part, she's been behaving. She hasn't been a problem."

"Nor will she be." Alexis spat, "I will drag her back home. That is my purpose here. And that is the only thing that will cause me to return."

The man shrugged, "Fair enough. I'm not quite sure how to answer your question, not in this language... My name is... Hard to translate. You can think of me as the guardian who decides whether one enters your home, or returns to this world."

Alexus blinked in surprise, "I was not aware such a thing existed."

“It didn’t.” He shrugged, “Until I did.”

She hissed at the implication. He smiled slowly, “I’m not the only new Marked One. I’ve met two others. One inherited from Chaos. The other, from. . . The One Who Sets the Path? Is that the right way to say it?”

Alexus glared at him, “You speak ridiculous lies. I would not anger Chaos in that way.”

“She’s a friend.”

Alexus froze, staring at him. He’d spoken the truth. Not just his own understanding of truth, but truth that resonated with the ’verse. He was not lying. He must truly be a new Marked One. “How? How did you come to be?”

“A mortal forged me, from the heart of the sun.” He said, hesitating over the words. It was clear that he did not often speak this language. His intonations suggested he spoke the same language of these others. Did the Marked of this world dwell with these lesser creatures? It was disgusting, but might explain why these people allowed themselves to indulge so much. They had already experienced a touch of paradise.

“You aren’t behaving.” The man said, waving a hand, “We don’t kill, here. Not without good reason. You have not seen good reason. We also don’t steal. Surely you were shown some of the customs before you arrived here?”

“I won’t be here long enough.” She sneered, “I will get her, and drag her back.”

“She has three weeks travel on you.” He replied, rolling his eyes. “She is also not making any of us nervous. You are. This world has suffered recently. We won’t let it suffer further by something like you. If you won’t obey the local laws, I will expel you.”

Alexus glared at him, “Don’t mistake me, Marked. I am Alexis. I am the unceasing.”

“I know.” He smiled at her, “I can see your thoughts. Your hopes, your dreams. I can see the anger you have at your sister for leaving. I can see that you are actually craving more. . . You don’t have a word for the food. I can also see that you enjoyed the fight you had here. Enjoyed ending their lives. You are not to mistake me. I am a Marked One. I am not threatened by you. If you are unceasing, then I will imprison you for eternity. My efforts will never run dry. It doesn’t matter if yours won’t. I can hold you forever.”

Alexus rolled her eyes in frustration, “Fine. What is it you want of me?”

“Obey our laws.” He shrugged, “If you do that, I won’t have a problem with you. If I think you’re crossing a line, I’ll come back. You’ll get a warning. An opportunity. I don’t want to keep an eye on you. I have more important matters in front of me. So. . . Don’t be a problem for me.”

She acknowledged the threat with a nod and stood up, tossing her last salty object into her mouth with a crunch. “Acceptable. I will now resume my hunt.”

Wrodin

A hand touched his shoulder reassuringly, and he looked sideways at the pink-haired woman in disgust. "Come to gloat, Sarin?"

"No." The woman laughed, "Not at all. In fact, I have an offer."

He rolled his eyes. "That part of my life is over. Survival is all I am interested in."

"I wasn't going to offer you divinity." Sarin replied easily, and waved to where they could both see the mage dancing in front of a field. "She's an interesting one, isn't she, Wrodin? She doesn't quite fit."

He spat on the ground, "She's a beast."

"Not untrue." Sarin shrugged, "All the same, I'm interested in her survival."

Wrodin smiled, "She's killed two today. She can take care of herself. She did not become a mage capable of unbinding the effects of hellflame by being a weak and quivering little creature. She's part celestial, if I'm not wrong."

"Totally wrong." Sarin laughed, "Also, not wrong at all. She's a woman, Wrodin. She has hopes and dreams. That's what matters. . . Also, she has a bounty hunter on her trail. One who is actually potentially much stronger than she is. More determined at the very least. They're from. . . Beyond the Void."

He swallowed nervously, "Ah. That presents you with a problem. It eases my own anxiety. Soon, this mage will be dead or gone. The plains will return to normal."

"No, they won't." Sarin shrugged, "See, she's important. The others have all agreed. She's not some pawn of mine or anyone else, Wrodin, but all the same. . . She's important."

Wrodin raised an eyebrow at the woman who had deposed him, "What do you mean? Tyrsans are important because we decide they will be. The world conforms to them because the gods have decided that the world should keep them safe."

"Not this time." Sarin grinned, "She's new. She is something new. Doesn't that just. . . Ooh. It makes me fizz. She's not a new god, like Kru. But she is something new all the same. She's grown beyond what she was created to do. She's looking to carve out her own life. So. . . We want her to. We want you to act as a bit of. . . Bodyguard. Someone who can step in at the last moment. Be our little divine instrument to make sure she survives."

The old hermit grunted distrustfully, and sat down. "No. That's my final word on it, Sarin."

"You are still mortal." She replied with a hint of irritation, "I could make it happen to you anyway."

He nodded, "True. I will still resist you, even if you make it my fate."

"Fine." Sarin replied, "All the same. You will get the opportunity to save her. Make sure you've made up your mind about that decision before it presents itself. I will be sorely disappointed if you waste the potential of the girl."

"Which one?" Wrodin asked drily, but the woman was gone.

Dyys

Sweat ran down her back as she moved in tune with the wind. Her feet danced across the dead soil, touching only briefly before flying once more to the air. Her arms twisted in the air. It wasn't an elegant sight, and it wasn't beautiful. What she was doing wasn't a beautiful thing. It wasn't a kind thing. Very few things in any world fall into the categories of good or evil.

However, doing this kind of magic could damn your soul.

She paused, breathing heavily in midstride, floating for a moment before she touched down. Her feet came down gently, but the ground beneath her feet collapsed and shattered as if a boulder had struck it. She held her hands up into the air. The wind twisted around her into a screaming funnel that obscured the rest of the world from her view.

She reached up and grabbed the light.

Dyys fell backwards onto her butt, with a tired groan as the funnel vanished. She flopped onto the ground, yawning. She'd used up every bit of strength she'd had to do this. It had better be worth it, in the end.

She glanced to the side, smiling as she saw the woman walking passed. The woman trying very hard to pretend she hadn't been terrified and wondering if she should draw that rusty sword of hers.

Dyys still wasn't sure what to make of Bel. Not being able to directly talk to her was making life difficult. Yet, if she linked their minds so they could speak openly... She was almost certain that Bel would find it insulting. It wasn't Bel's fault that Dyys didn't know how to talk to her.

She held up the small orb of light in her fist. It was so much easier to do this, than to deal with the complexities that these people went through each and every day. Their hopes and fears over a continued existence.

She stood up, staggering over to the edge of the farmhouse, and leaned on a verandah post. "Hey, Bel?"

The woman stabbed a shovel into the ground and made an irritated gesture. Dyys smiled weakly, "Are there any glass jars or anything like that?"

Bel scratched her head and shrugged. She made the same gesture again.

"For this." Dyys held up the orb, flashing the incredibly bright light, before tucking it back into her fist.

The woman rubbed her eyes, and swallowed nervously. Then she pretended to open a door above her head.

Dyys waved, "Thanks."

She stumbled into the farmhouse, and looked around. There weren't really any rooms, though there were natural divisions. Jean slept close to the front door, and Bel to the back. Dyys had slept outside, under the starlight. It was an experience she relished. One she'd never had before she came to this world. However, in the area that was the kitchen, there were cupboards that were overhead.

Dyys opened a couple before she found what she was looking for. Jars, probably for making preserves of some kind. They weren't quite strong enough, but a handful would be. She took three, tucking them under one arm and walked outside, glancing over. She was loathe to ask, the woman was still busy digging graves for the men that she'd killed this morning, but she needed help.

"Um... Bel. Sorry."

The woman stabbed the shovel into the ground and signed, “What!?”

Dyys sighed, “I need some help. You won’t really like it.”

Bel stalked over, one hand on her sword hilt, and looked at her pointedly.

Dyys swallowed, “So... I captured some sunlight. That’s the glowing little orb. But I need to keep it safe, until I’ve gathered the other ingredients I need. For that, I need something better than these jars. I can make it, by breaking them... But I can’t do that and hold the orb.”

Bel signed, “What?”

Dyys frowned, “You’re going to hold onto a piece of the sun for me. You need to keep your mind clear. No fears, no dreams. Nothing. Just... Emptiness. Can you do that?”

Bel shook her head instantly. Dyys sighed, “Come on. It isn’t that scary. Worst case, the sunlight escapes and tries to blind us.”

“No.” Bel mouthed.

Dyys rolled her eyes, “Fine. Then can you help with the other bit? Magically turning the jars into a better container?”

Bel glared at her.

“One or the other.” Dyys sighed, “I can’t hold onto this thing forever. It really isn’t that scary. It is just magic.”

Bel frowned and then indicated herself, and shrugged.

Dyys thought for a moment, “You don’t have magic? Is that it?”

The woman nodded.

Dyys laughed. “Everyone has magic. Really. It is just a skill that gets taught. Wintralassa didn’t steal magic from the gods to let some of her people go without it. You’ve probably used it without even knowing. It’s as part of being human as is breathing.”

Bel blinked, looking at her curiously. Dyys shrugged, “Mages tend to be secretive. There’s a reason I’m not with the rest.”

The woman sighed heavily, and pointed at the jars.

Dyys set them out at even points, and then shrugged, “Okay... Um... First step, close your eyes. Try and see the jars. See the shape they form. It’ll be instinctual. You’ll be able to draw a shape across every point.”

Bel nodded stiffly, concentrating. It wasn’t necessary, but it was what every beginning did. Trying to push their whole will into it. Which, generally speaking, wasn’t a great idea. In the war of wills, the world would win out against you. Only the celestials had the strength of will to bend reality to heel.

“Next, light a fire across that pattern. Let it burn away the pattern in your mind.” Dyys spoke cautiously, allowing a little mana to flow from her and into Bel. The magic had to come from somewhere, and humans couldn’t make it themselves. She’d glossed over that. It’d probably scare the woman.

The glasses cracked.

Dyys grinned, “Good. Now... Picture them all being turned to ash. Instantly. Each and every piece. Shatter the glass into the tiniest fragments, and convert each one to ash, one by one.”

There was a moment of resistance as mana burned, and then the glass in front of them slumped into a puddle. Dyys was surprised. Bel was a natural at this. There was no way most people would be able to do this sort of thing on their first attempt. She'd actually expected it to fail, and then get Bel to hold the orb of light whilst she made the container.

"Draw a symbol in the air. A symbol for protection." Dyys instructed, "It doesn't matter what it looks like, as long as it means protection for you."

She rolled her eyes at how quickly Bel responded. Of course someone who used sign would have a mental symbol for protection. It wasn't actually that far off the ancient rune for shield. Probably a memory from earlier days of humanity.

The glass spiralled around in the air, and Dyys flinched. This was the hard part. "Now. Push on that symbol. Make it happen. Everything you have, every thought and every ounce of strength, push it into the symbol."

There was a small flash of lightning, and Bel was launched off her feet.

Dyys picked up the new container, engraved with the shield rune, and dropped the orb of light inside it. She smiled down at Bel, who was holding her chest painfully. She held out a hand, and picked the woman up. "Here, see what you did."

The woman glared at her, and looked at the container dubiously. Dyys grinned, "This thing could contain a djinn. You did good. To be honest... I was hoping you'd give up and hold the light so I could do it."

She wasn't certain, but she was fairly certain that Bel swore at her. Dyys put the jar on the verandah, and touched her shoulders gently. "Wait... Let me check you. You did just get a minor rebound. Magic can do... Bad things."

Bel glared at her, and crossed her arms.

Dyys nodded slowly, "Well, looks like you'll be mostly okay... It did take your strength, though."

The woman raised an eyebrow, and Dyys shrugged, "Five."

Bel scratched her head, as Dyys continued counting inside her head.

"One."

The woman's eyes fluttered shut, and she fell backwards. Dyys caught her easily and picked her up. She tossed her over her shoulder, and picked up the jar in the other hand, and walked into the farmhouse.

She laid Bel down on the sleeping mat without ceremony, before carefully placing the jar on the dining table. She quickly bent the lids into a single one with a splash of magical energy, and sealed the top. The rune would stop the light leaving without help, but it never hurt to encourage things. She was sharing the farmhouse with two people who had no idea at all about magic.

She sat at the table, rubbing her temples. She was hungry, now. She knew that Bel would be ravenous when she woke up. The woman had burned out her energy stores with the rebound. The spell itself wasn't particularly taxing, but it required both hands, and the orb of light had required persistent concentration. She wasn't able to multitask that easily.

"Greetings."

She waved a hand at the man in the doorway, "About time. I thought you were just going to

stare all day.”

The man laughed softly, and Dyys realised he’d spoken in Wyrddin, and she’d answered in it as well. She groaned and looked up at what looked just like a hermit. Poor clothes, unkempt beard. But there was no way someone who spoke an ancient and powerful language like that one wasn’t a hermit by choice. “Kregstad.”

The man shrugged, “I am called Wrodin. I am the Wrodin, but not anymore. It is. . . Difficult to explain.”

“You got kicked out.” Dyys rolled her eyes, “Not that hard. I’m a mage. I’ve dealt with gods before. There’s no need to go there.”

“You’re not just a mage, though, are you?” He raised an eyebrow, “What are you doing here? Here of all places?”

“I just want to be left alone.” Dyys growled, her voice coming with a threat.

The man shrugged, and pulled a loaf of bread from inside his stinking rags. He placed it on the table, “As do I. I’m not keen on the attention your presence might bring to my chosen home.”

Dyys glanced over at Bel, and then back at the bread. She shrugged. She wasn’t in a position to turn down food, she couldn’t summon it. She could only change it. “For her sake. I’m not planning on staying, Wrodin. I’m healing the farm, and then I’m on to the next. That’s what I do. It is enough for me.”

He sat at the table, and nodded slowly, and then slid the bread over to her. “Is it? Your people don’t thrive on inaction, if I recall.”

“No.” Dyys smiled tightly, waving a hand over the bread and slicing it cleanly. “Just me. I have never felt better than I have since I left. No one has ever run away before. . . And I will keep running. You don’t have to worry.”

Bel sat up slowly, silently. Dyys wondered why the woman was so silent. She barely even heard her breathe. It would be rude to ask, but she was fascinated by the woman. By every aspect of her. The woman had tried magic with the smallest of promptings. Had succeeded where most beginners would absolutely fail. Immediately fail with a rebound.

Dyys waved, “You need to eat, Bel. Sit down.”

The woman tiredly nodded, and then looked at the food and the newcomer in surprise. She signed something, and Wrodin signed back to her. He spoke slowly, “Just a greeting. Bel and I have met before, mage. She’s the one who showed me which of the hills was least likely to be visited by those in this village.”

Dyys smiled softly, and flicked a hand. Plates flew from the kitchen and landed in front of her. She placed two slices of bread on one, and concentrated. The top slice evaporated, twisting for a moment, before pouring as honey over the remaining bread. She pushed it in front of Bel. “Seriously. You really need to eat. You need the energy. No arguments.”

The woman glared at her, but sighed and took it.

“What would you like, hermit?”

He shrugged, “I don’t seek pleasure from this world. Only sustenance.”

“What are you, a monk?” Dyys laughed, and shoved a plate with a cooked slice over to him. For herself, she also made honey. It was one of the fastest foods for absorbing energy, and she’d

burned out most of hers performing the spell.

“How does captured sunlight assist you?”

Dyys tapped the top of the jar, “This? Oh. That’s pretty simple. Think of it like... Alchemy. You need the right balance of ingredients to create something. You can’t create something from nothing. This world has been damaged by the calamity. It needs an infusion of... Creation itself. So I’m gathering elements of creation. I’ll create a purified spell of creation, and that should revitalise things.”

The hermit choked on his toast, “A creation spell? With the eight elements? Do you know how hard one of those is to pull off?”

“I’ve cast more than two dozen of them in the last six months.” Dyys shrugged, “I know what I’m doing, Wrodin.”

Bel tapped her arm, and Dyys looked at her. She signed something in the air that she didn’t understand, and then pointed skywards. Dyys glanced over, “You told her you used to be a god? And she didn’t freak out?”

Wrodin smiled sheepishly, “I... Had an outburst, one day. I am still adapting to this... Limited... Form.”

Dyys looked back at Bel and shrugged, “He’s not the first celestial I’ve met. I’m a mage. We deal with this kind of thing now and then.”

“Not in this world.” She heard whispered into her mind, and glared at Wrodin. He smiled and the thought entered her mind silently, “Mages here are capable of little more than basic destruction magic. It takes divine intervention just to summon a ghoul.”

Dyys swallowed. She’d known she was more skilled and more powerful than most mages, but if his suggestion was true, then she might walk the entire continent and never encounter anyone who was as skilled as she was. As powerful as she was. She knew she’d encounter mages who could do things she couldn’t, but that was down mostly to her lack of skill in areas of magic. It wasn’t an inherent limitation of who she was.

Bel smiled and pointed at her food and then gave her a thumbs up.

Dyys nodded, “Thanks. Kinda my fault you’re this hungry though. Eat as much as you can. I mean it. I don’t want to have to drag you out of a coma.”

Wrodin stood up, “Well, I’ve said what I wanted to. Bear it in mind.”

He left, and Dyys drummed her hands on the tabletop nervously. A warm hand grabbed hers, stopping her. She sighed, “Sorry. Just nervous.”

Bel flicked the side of her head. Dyys turned to face her, “Sorry. I should look when I talk. Right?”

The woman nodded.

“I’m just nervous. Sorry.” Dyys repeated, unsure if Bel had hearing problems as well as speech, and shrugged, “I didn’t mean for you to get hurt.”

The woman frowned and then quickly opened one hand, and stared at it in surprise.

Dyys nodded, “Yeah, you did magic. I did help. It isn’t something you should try on your own. But... Like I said. Anyone can do magic, if they know how. It’s a skill. Though, you pulled it off. You’ve got a talent for it.”

Bel frowned and shook her head. Dyys laughed, “That makes you uncomfortable?”

She nodded.

Dyys shrugged, “I can get that. Magic isn’t that rare where I’m from. About half of us can use it. It’s... Different than here. A different kind of place. If you stand out, if you’re different, you die. That simple. Magic is the only exception.”

She held up her hair, “This is magic. That’s why it looks so weird.”

Bel touched the proffered hair, and then looked up in surprise. Dyys grinned, “Feels normal, doesn’t it? It is, for the most part. But, if you wanted a bit of power, for a spell or something, you could take one of my hairs. They store about the same as your average quartz crystal.”

Bel shook her head, quickly grabbing another piece of bread. Dyys flicked another slice into the air, converting it into honey as she did. The woman smiled gratefully and bit it.

Dyys leaned back on the chair, yawning. “I’m sorry. I’m tired. If you need something, wake me up?”

Bel nodded, as if she was disappointed.

Dyys stood up, and scratched her chin. She plucked one of her hairs with a wince. She tied it into a small knot, and then looped it around Bel’s wrist and tied it into a bracelet.

The woman looked at it in surprise, and then up at her.

“If you need me, break the bracelet.” Dyys smiled, “It won’t matter where you are, I’ll hear it. Okay? So we don’t have a repeat of this morning. I know you can take care of yourself, but I figured fighting bandits naked was a bit much.”

Bel nodded slowly, her cheeks reddening.

Dyys wasn’t sure what that was about. She wasn’t sure about most things when it came to Bel. It was too hard with the language barrier. She had no idea what was going through the woman’s mind.

She stumbled out onto the verandah, and closed her eyes.

She was asleep before she hit the ground.

Bel

She chewed the bread slowly, thoughtfully. Partly because this was the last slice she'd get with honey on it. She hadn't had honey since before the calamity. It seemed that the bees had been completely wiped out. That was part of the problem effecting the world's ecosystem. Most of the insects had vanished as if they had never existed at all. Honey was as much a luxury item as anything else.

She could feel the painful hunger in her stomach, so much stronger than the dull ache she'd had before she'd helped the mage. They were right, she needed to eat. She wasn't going to argue. Not that she wanted to argue with the mage. She wanted to talk to them. It was like the world had been lit up in new colours she'd never seen before. She could do magic.

Magic wasn't what she'd thought. It hadn't made her feel powerful when she'd used it. It had made her feel happy, feel excited. Like standing atop a mountain and riding a raft down a raging river. It was a thrill. It didn't feel dark and dangerous. Even though she'd been hit by her first spell, she really wanted to try again. She wanted to learn everything she could before the mage moved on.

She knew that they would go. There was nothing to keep them here. Somehow, that made her feel anxious. It wasn't just the excitement over learning magic either. The mage treated her as an equal. She treated the language barrier as her own fault, not a failure on Bel's part. She'd never met anyone who would do that.

Her stomach turned as she remembered that morning.

The mage wasn't what her mind kept trying to make her out to be. She was beyond dangerous. She was a weapon who could kill. A weapon who could kill and saw no guilt in it, and no regret. The mage was willing to talk about it as if it were just another moment amongst any other.

Bel looked at the bracelet threaded around her wrist, and smiled softly.

It wasn't just a kind gesture, it was kind of beautiful. She was sure she'd feel regret if she ever had to break it. It didn't look like something that had been threaded together out of a single hair. It seemed like it had been spun together, as if it were more substantial. She shouldn't be surprised at that. The hair was magic. Magic blood-red hair. That had to make you stand out in the crowd.

People who were different were killed, where the mage was from. Bel frowned, feeling sad. When the mage had said that, she'd understood. That if she'd lived where the mage had, they would have killed her. That the mage had never met anyone like her before. It hurt more than it should have. The mage was probably just trying to ask for space to try and do things right, but it hurt to think that beyond the mild neglect she was often given by the people of Balavid there was a place that would actively hate her for being born the way she was.

She finished the slice regretfully, and picked up the next. She turned it over. In some ways, she felt guilty for eating so much. It was more food than she'd seen for a while. Yet, she was also fairly certain that the mage hadn't been insisting without good reason. A spell had rebounded and hit her. It was quite possible she was on the edge of death and didn't realise it.

She'd done magic.

It felt like her whole future had been changed, with that one moment. She'd thought she was a farmhand. She didn't have the skills required to be much else, and she'd always enjoyed the work... But the farm was dead. The entire world might well be. If she could learn the magic the mage was using... She could be like them. She could walk onto a farm and bring it back to life. She could be something more than she was.

She'd never really dreamed of life beyond this small village.

She'd grown up here, dreaming of owning a farm. Even when she'd been taken to visit the cities, she'd never really enjoyed it for long. She had missed her home, the quiet and the routine. She'd always thought she would marry Izak, as did everyone else until the calamity. Her life was nothing beyond a stereotype, until that one moment when fire had poured from the skies. Izak had died. Along with almost everyone else.

Bel felt an idea ticking away inside her head and shoved the food in her mouth. She stepped onto the verandah and jumped, swinging herself up onto the roof. She walked up to the peak, and placed one hand on the chimney, steadying herself.

She could see it from here. The stone that no one could approach.

The stone that had killed everyone.

It still lay there, smoking, months after the crash.

Maybe, with magic, she could get rid of it. Maybe if she could do that, then the farm would stand a better chance. Had Jean even told the mage it still existed? That it was still poisoning the soil?

Lilibeth

Lilibeth hoisted her satchel as she stepped into the courtyard. There wasn't much in the simple back. A few pieces of food, some water, and a spare sword. Anything else was a luxury she simply couldn't afford to make. Once she reached the dwergaz ruin, even what she'd brought wouldn't matter.

She nodded briefly as she saw the Praetor in the yard, drilling her own soldiers with merciless abandon. Aurili's hair wasn't a typical Balavidian brown, it was a light gold. Not by birth, but by torture. It had changed when she'd been forced to feel fear for the weeks they'd spent in the dwergaz ruin before they found each other. Since that day, those eyes had not dimmed. They were as cold and calm as the girl who had been scared so badly she no longer feared at all.

Aurili waved to a centurion to take over and walked over to her, "I hear you're leaving, Praetor."

She nodded grimly, "I'm afraid I cannot tell you when to expect our return. I don't expect us to. We go for the ruins of the dwergaz, south of here."

Aurili glared grimly over to where a group of mages were packing, "For what purpose?"

"Officially, we seek magical sources to restore the court wizard." Lilibeth answered straightly, delivering the crushing blow to her bond-sister. That they were again searching for a book too powerful for any human hands. A book that they had promised themselves they wouldn't allow the country to ever seek out again.

Aurili fidgeted with the coin attached to her wrist, the symbol of Wrodin, "I cannot wish you well, then. I wish that you could stay by my side. I expect the capital to erupt into violence, and soon. The prince leaving may be enough to trigger the discontent... Or perhaps to calm it for a week or two. It is difficult at these times to know what people will do."

Lilibeth nodded slowly, and pulled out her necklace, "Have you heard from him? Recently?"

Aurili shrugged, "Wrodin has only chosen twice to appear to me. I would find it surprising if he sought me out, again. Both times, you were present, Praetor."

She sighed heavily, and tucked Meria's coin away again, "I haven't heard from Meria'el since the calamity began. In some ways, I wonder if the gods have abandoned us to die. To let the world end, slowly. That though the calamity is gone, the end has not. That the world has already fallen, it is simply a matter of time before we realise it."

Aurili smiled, her white eyes shining, "Such thoughts do not belong in a prophet of Meria. Hope should be your driving force. We can still fight, and we still serve the kingdom."

She put a hand on her shoulder, squeezing, "Have hope, Lilibeth. Whilst you and I stand strong, there is no one foolhardy enough to take what is ours."

Lilibeth put her hand on Aurili's shoulder, "Keep the kingdom safe for me, Praetor."

The two smiled, and briefly touched foreheads. Then the moment was over. Aurili returned to her position, barking orders again. That was all they ever shared. It was enough for them both. They didn't need to stand and speak. They knew what each other felt. They always had, since living in that cold and damp place where even the walls wanted to kill you.

She stepped over to the mage's entourage. He was bringing a half-dozen disciples with him. She wasn't sure if they'd be a help, or a hindrance. From what she could tell, they would certainly be pack animals. There were a half dozen bags of just books.

Carmichael sidled up to her, "Enjoy a parting romance with the Praetor?"

“Insult me again, wizard, and I’ll gut your loins.” Lilibeth replied drily, “I thought we were going to a library. Must we also bring one?”

“Yes.” Carmichael smiled slowly, “It’s a lifeline. My apprentices will sacrifice these books at the entrance, and using them I’ll be able to create recall spells. So that we can be yanked outside the cave in the case of unforeseen problems.”

Lilibeth nodded slowly. Helpful, but only just. To cast that kind of spell, you needed to be alive. To be able to focus enough to burn the scroll the spell was sealed into. However, death by dwergaz tended to be closer to immediate. This would boost morale, but it wouldn’t save anyone.

Her centurion stepped up beside her, saluting with his fist on his chest. She rolled her eyes, “Sam?”

“The half-legion is prepared to depart. We simply await your inspection, Praetor.” He half-barked. He had been a trainer before his promotion, and still found it hard not to scream obscenities into the face of whoever he was speaking to. She found it incredibly amusing, and had been known to use him as a messenger to nobles she particularly disliked. Or when she was bored.

She looked at Carmichael, “How long until you’re ready?”

“Preparations for the transport is nearly complete.” The wizard replied, “However, the prince hasn’t even left his bedchamber yet. I have an apprentice waiting outside.”

Lilibeth refrained from rolling her eyes. That would have bordered on treason. Neither she nor Carmichael could criticise the waste of space that was their prince. Instead, she had to draw things out, or let her soldiers become anxious as they waited. They were too young, too green, for this kind of thing. Though it was common.

She nodded at her centurion, “I will inspect the troops, Sam?”

He bowed to Carmichael, “Sir!”

The wizard rubbed one his ears, “Centurion.”

Lilibeth hid a smile as she turned and was lead over to where her children were waiting for her. Any hint of a smile vanished immediately. She glared at the soldiers lounging on the ground by their packs. Some were reading, some were eating. A few were polishing their weapons. Exactly none of them had the self-awareness to notice her approach. They were as good as dead.

“Attention!” Sam snapped before she could stop him. The half-legion shot to the feet in disarray. She sneered as she saw undone buckles, misbuttoned shirts, and even open shirts. These people had no idea of the death that was awaiting them. They couldn’t believe the stories of what they were walking into.

Lilibeth spat on the ground, “This is what you call ready for inspection, Centurion?”

Sam winced. It wasn’t his fault. She doubted he had any control over these idiots. She drew her shortsword, and paced in front of them, “You are a disgrace to the Second Legion. Every one of you. I should kill myself now, rather than bear the disgrace of having the prince die in your care. Yet I know not one of you would join me in this dishonour.”

One of the auxiliaries went to protest and a knife flew from her sleeve, stabbing him through the foot, “Shut up, slave!”

Lilibeth shook her head, “Traditionally, I would offer my soul into your hands as we walk towards our battle. But I won’t. Not yet. I will give you all ten minutes to prepare yourselves, but first... As none of you seem to appreciate the gravity of protecting the crown prince, perhaps you

need some encouragement to protect yourselves. We march to a dwergaz ruin. A ruin protected by a Wachterin. They exist. They are ruthless. No one here has ever defeated one. I have seen one, along with Praetor Aurili. We ran. We could not fight it. I may ask you to.”

She felt the fear growing in the crowd. It wasn’t as powerful a motivator as patriotism or duty, but it was what she had to hand. Yet, there were some unafraid. One of the legionnaires, his shirt open, his armour lying by his pack, shrugged, “So what if there is a mechanism? Why is that so scary?”

Lilibeth killed him. Her blade slashed through his throat instantly, and he fell to his hands and knees. Choking out his last breaths. She pulled a handkerchief from her pocket and began cleaning his blood from her sword. Standing over him as he slowly died, and the rest of the soldiers stood at attention. None of them stared directly at her. None of them were able to look her way at all. She kicked the soldier onto his side, and stomped down, crushing his ribs and easing his passing.

She sheathed her sword with a clang, and sighed, “Do any others of you wish the merciful death reserved for a fool? It would be no trouble. If you fear not the dwergaz, then I don’t want you with me, and will speed your passing to the afterlife. I hear the gods are merciful to those who cannot think for themselves.”

There were no answers. She nodded to Sam, “Ten minutes, not a moment longer. If any soldier is unprepared, I’ll end you, centurion. Get them ready, or kill them.”

She walked away.

It had been a long time since she’d killed anyone under her command. A very long time. Yet, she couldn’t see an alternative. She needed to do something to wake them up to the gravity of the situation. Make them understand exactly what it was they were facing.

“Was that strictly necessary?”

She glared at the wizard, “Do you suppose to tell me how to lead, mad mage?”

Carmichael sighed, “Of course not. Yet, the number of soldiers does factor into the calculations I must make.”

“He would have caused your calculations to be wrong.” Lilibeth replied grimly, “He was a danger to us, and to the prince. A coward who would have brought hell down upon us.”

“I have no doubt.” The wizard replied, and returned to instructing his apprentices. It occurred to her that Carmichael was checking on her, himself. Seeing just what sort of state of mind she was in. He was seeing if she would be a danger to the mission.

She suppressed an angry string of curse words. She did not kill anyone lightly. She did however, do what was necessary. That was who she was.

Lilibeth sucked in her breath as her eyes flared.

The ground slammed into her face, and she winced, looking around in the darkness. She couldn’t see where she was, not exactly. There was a hard but shaped stone beneath her. She rose into a crouch, hand going for her sword, but finding nothing. Absolutely nothing. She was naked in the darkness.

“Time... To... Pay me... Back... Mortal.” A voice echoed somewhere ahead of her in the darkness, a voice she didn’t recognise. She could hear something else as well. A dripping. Soft and slow, but not consistent. Not like water dripping from a cave ceiling.

“I... I can’t fight that thing.” She heard the prince whisper from the same direction. She

tried to step forward, but she couldn't move. She was rooted to the spot. Forced to be an unknown observer.

"Kal an sina dal manda sin da ra fas -" The first voice began angrily. That was a language that Lilibeth recognised from her time with Carmichael. It was the language of demons. An old language, closely related to one of the first languages spoken on the continent. "Of course you can't, idiot. I want my magic back. You came here for magic, right? So you have some. I need it."

Lilibeth frowned. Why and how had the prince taken anyone's magic? He had none of his own.

A new voice spoke with desperation behind her, causing her to spin, craning her neck to see. "What exactly could be pleasing in this?"

What she saw terrified her to her core. A demon floated in the air. Red glowing hair like a viper's nest. Slitted eyes born of fire. The creature looked like it was crying, like it was horrified. "You forced me to be the first to kill a traitor. I don't want my name attached to your history. I don't want to be any part of the tale of the first traitor. You were a Fury. Where was the anger when you needed it? Why did you betray us?"

Lilibeth winced, as sigils of banishment appeared in front of the demon, and then they were gone.

A human appeared, a white glow surrounding them, as they walked towards her calmly. They wore a rusty sword on their waist, and a loose-fitting shirt. This wasn't a soldier, not even someone playing at soldier. A peasant of some kind.

The woman smiled directly at her, and then signed with her hands. Lilibeth didn't know sign, but she knew that some people, unable to speak or hear, might use it. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

The woman shrugged, and then signed something else that Lilibeth had not a clue about. The praetor winced as blood slowly appeared at the corner of the woman's mouth, bubbling and flowing, yet the woman didn't fall down dead. It was like she didn't even notice it.

There was a flash of fire, and another figure appeared next to the woman. This was... Something like a woman, but not. The ears were pointed, and her eyes were flecked with red. Just looking at her made Lilibeth's stomach turn. She could feel the corruption. It felt just like the calamity had. Disgusting. Like she was being swallowed alive in a tarpit.

"What are you waiting for demon? Why hesitate? Kill the mortal. Do it! It is the right thing to do. They are preventing you from your duty. Kill them!" The newcomer screamed at someone who wasn't there.

Lilibeth felt the world twist, turning her to a new location in the dark, and put a hand to her mouth to stop herself from throwing up. In front of her were two things. One she could see, and one she could only feel.

The one she could see was a man, who looked like a bedraggled beggar. His hair was knotted and stank, even from this distance. She felt almost like she could bite off and chew the disgusting stench rolling off his unwashed body. He coughed, like he was dying, "What do you want with me, Kao'el?"

The one Lilibeth couldn't speak replied evenly, confidently, and almost playfully. "Everything. I want you, Wrodin. I choose you, as my champion. Now get up. You have work to do."

The praetor didn't get a chance to gawk in wonder, as pain wracked her skull. She fell to her knees, staring at black flames lacing up both her arms. Her skin was crumbling. She felt like she

was dying. That she wouldn't be coming back to warn anyone.

A white light appeared in front of her. A kind face looked at her, and raised her chin gently, "Lilibeth. It would be you, wouldn't it?"

"Goddess." She managed, her chest feeling like it a boulder was pressing down on it. The goddess patted out the flames gently, and raised her to her feet, "Confidence, child. You need to have faith that you can make it through this. This is bigger than you know. You'll play no small part in coming events. I will walk with you. I know I haven't given you much attention lately, I've been distracted. I... Apologise."

Lilibeth bowed quickly, holding her mouth as she almost threw up again. "No need, goddess. I am but a servant."

"No." Meria replied, lifting her head, "You're not. You're a champion. A fighter who never quits. A survivor who lives no matter how desperate things get. I am so very proud of you. Never forget that... But, they need you. It's time to wake up."

Lilibeth only managed to feel confusion for a moment before something hit her, carrying and throwing her into the air. She tumbled, falling and twisting, the wind in her ears.

She sat up with a start, her skull cracking into Sam's.

He groaned, stumbling backwards.

Lilibeth swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry. She coughed and reached for her canteen, and took a quick swig. She rolled the water on her dehydrated tongue, letting it soak in before she swallowed.

The praetor staggered upright, and heard the snickering from her soldiers. She sighed heavily, "Carmichael."

The wizard approached from nearby, "Ah. Awake are we?"

She noticed the distinct absence of title from his question, and she glared at him, "We have more preparations to do, mad mage."

He rolled his eyes, "After that performance? I don't think anyone wants a fainting soldier."

"I was speaking with Meria'el." She snapped, her pink eyes flashing angrily at him, and the wizard paused, "Truly? Is that what you see in madness? Your goddess?"

"Look me in the eye, wizard!" Lilibeth yelled angrily, "What do you see? Do you see the touch of madness there? Tell me, oh learn'ed one. Where does one get eyes like mine?"

The wizard paused in surprise, "You've got to be kidding me. You're no prophet. You're a soldier. Prophets sit in palaces and -"

"I serve Meria." She spat, "What interest would the goddess of practicalities have in a temple monk who doesn't live?"

Carmichael frowned and waved a hand in the air, obviously casting a spell. He blinked in surprise at whatever results he got. "You... May have spoken to something. I can't confirm what it was."

"Walk with me." She growled between gritted teeth.

The wizard sighed and the two moved away from the soldiers. Lilibeth sighed, "You already know I am her prophet, ass. What are you playing at?"

"I've heard it." He admitted, "That doesn't mean I believe it. Especially not after the calamity."

"I had a vision." Lilibeth said, deciding to plough on, "The prince will have to have a charged crystal on his person. He will give it to someone who will save his life. Someone he will meet in the ruins."

Carmichael shrugged, "Unusual request, but not so dangerous we can't accommodate it. Who is this mysterious saviour we meet?"

"A Fury."

The wizard stumbled, and stared at her, "The hunter demons? The ones tasked with dragging souls to hell? Why in the gods would one of those be here? And why would it help our prince?"

Lilibeth shrugged, "I have no idea. But it wasn't the only Fury I saw. I also saw a woman. She couldn't speak, only sign. A peasant. She has some role in all of this."

"What did she say to you?"

Lilibeth laughed, "I don't speak sign, wizard. Do you?"

"Yes." He replied in surprise, "I find it exceptionally useful to speak to my apprentices in meetings that way. Can you remember the signs?"

"Not really." Lilibeth shrugged, "Maybe... This?"

Carmichael looked at her carefully, "Mmm... That might be sign, bad sign, for 'I'll see you soon.'"

Lilibeth smiled slowly, "That would fit. The human was caught between a god, and the second demon. The one I didn't see helping our prince."

"What god?" Carmichael asked, visibly beginning to sweat.

The praetor shook her head, "I didn't recognise her... But she was dark. Corrupted somehow. Except not. I don't know how to explain it."

"You just did." The wizard flinched, "Kru. Fucking motherfuck. Uh... Kru is a new god. Born recently. She was corrupted, briefly, by the Fel. She is not kind and has the interests of no one at heart. She's also the heir-apparent of Kao'el. And the invader of Ozandius. Commander of the orkish forces. I'm not certain, but I believe she was also born a Fae, or an elf."

"Fae." Lilibeth shivered, "Definitely a Fae. Gods save us."

"They can't." Carmichael rubbed sweat from his forehead, "Kru is stronger than any of the other gods, barring maybe Trei'el."

Lilibeth raised an eyebrow, "And who is that?"

"The god who ascended at Calis." He confirmed, "Trei'el has no limits except those he makes. A similar story with Kru. I guess you could call them the balance of the new gods."

Lilibeth sighed, "And how do you know all this, mad mage?"

"I'm a wizard." Carmichael shrugged, "Gods. You really are a prophet, aren't you?"

"I was born with blue eyes." Lilibeth replied, "I crawled out of that dwergaz cave with pink."

The wizard nodded slowly, "What about... The other praetor? Her white eyes?"

Lilibeth shook her head, "That's her secret, wizard. Don't go poking around. You'll regret it."

He smiled weakly, "Well. I guess I have a crystal to prepare for the prince."

She nodded and turned back, “Hopefully I will have soldiers for you.”

She didn’t finish the way she wanted to. She wanted to say ‘for you to send to their deaths’. She wasn’t feeling optimistic anymore. She was feeling terrified that she hadn’t seen Carmichael in her vision at all. If he was dead, then their chances of making it out were nearly nil. The prince would survive, protected by the gods. That was the path she’d seen.

She hadn’t seen herself survive, either.

Alexus

Following the local laws. This was a joke. A twisted requirement of creatures unaware of how much damage her target could do to the world. This was just like the gods. Interfering in the course of justice, preventing the carriage of righteousness. Not because they cared for the world, nor because they had some better understanding of it than anyone else. They did it for fun. To enjoy themselves as they watched the world suffer.

She sat in a wooden carriage, amongst crates and sacks. Her hood obscured her face, though it didn't matter a whole heap. The driver was unaware that she had stowed away with him. He had two guards to defend his loot from the bandits, but this pathetic little merchant... Her hands clenched into helpless fists. She just wanted to kill him. It would make her life so much simpler. Eliminate him and take the horse.

Yet, the gods would be watching.

She might be sent to bring down creatures that could threaten the heavens, but it did not mean that she herself was a threat to them. She was just a hunter. They were beyond the hunt. This world was creaking out its last breaths, but even gods of such a forlorn place would have power beyond comprehension. They could restore the world. They could undo any curse. The world was in the hands of its people. All they had to do, was turn and ask. Yet, the gods wouldn't act. That was what it meant to be a god. To be useless. To watch as the people who adored you died. To do nothing. Until a single creature was threatened.

The gods played favourites.

She didn't know how or why, but the gods had decided that her target was a favourite. Her target didn't even belong in this world. They never had. They would bring chaos and destruction in their wake. They might well destroy what was left of this world, and the gods would count it a success if they saved the life of this one individual.

Alexus bared her fangs silently. She had been sent to drag the target back. That is what she would do, no matter what... Yet she also knew the gods themselves were trying to get in her way. She had never fought a god successfully. She'd lost missions every time the gods decided that her target was something they were interested in. She was called the Unceasing by her own kind, but twice she had been defeated.

There could not be allowed to be a third time.

She would find them, and she would drag them back to the pits of hell.

Wrodin

He sat in the cold and damp of his home, looking with depression at the table he had shattered in anger.

The anger was slowly fading now. Anger at himself, and the gods. He hadn't been able to sit back and watch. He'd promised himself he wouldn't get involved in whatever Sarin wanted him to. If it meant the end of reality, so be it. He was done with reality. If he died, then he didn't care.

Yet, it seemed he still wasn't willing to let others die, not when he could do something about it.

So he'd gone and threatened the mage. It was an excuse, to produce the food that the two of them had needed to stay alive. The mage was reckless. Her magic was beyond dangerous, and yet she didn't just practice it. She taught it to others as if it wasn't placing their life at risk. Forever.

He liked Bel. She had a refreshingly pessimistic outlook on the world. So when he had seen the spell rebound, and very nearly drain her soul away, he had to act. He had gone and saved her. He knew the mage knew he had saved her... And yet it was as if the mage didn't care at all. As if life and death were a concept that the mage simply didn't understand.

He wouldn't be shocked if she really didn't.

The Fae were eternal. They lived in a cycle of birth, death and reincarnation.

The Elfin were immortal. They didn't die by any natural means.

Humanity was mortal. They died, and their souls were collected by the gods. They were judged, and sent either to paradise to live with the god who had the greatest claim on their soul, or they were sent into the Halls of the Hells. There, the soul was purified, and then it was destroyed. It was purified by torture and vengeance, by the demons of that particular hell.

There were ten circles of hell. In the deepest circle, the worst crimes were punished. Crimes that could not be forgiven. Those who harmed children, those who killed innocents. The mass murderers, the warmongers, the mages who sacrificed anything for their cause. If no god claimed them, they ended up in the depths of the tenth circle.

That circle was alone watched over by a unique and terrifying race. Half of them were born as slaves, carrying out the labour of the realm. The other half were born to magic, and became the purifiers. The torturers. They alone were forced to experience the sins of their prisoners. Forced to be the confessor of humanity's worst. Yet, in all of time that the Halls of the Hells had existed, not once had a single member of that race chosen to be anything else.

Never once had any of them ever rebelled.

They were ruled over by a god. One that even Wrodin had avoided insulting. He was cruel, and callous, and drove justice into the hearts of all his realms with an iron fist. No one had ever dared to disobey an order of his. No one had ever broken a single one of his laws. They had punishments written down, but judgement had never had to be passed before.

Until now.

Wrodin didn't understand it. He wondered how long it would be before Bel opened her eyes and realised that the mage wasn't human. That she had four incredible fangs. That she didn't have fingernails, she had claws. That the belt around her waist was a living snake. That her eyes weren't that of a human. They were vertical slits, lit with a red light. It was an actual light, not just a colour to the iris.

This mage was a Fury. She was supposed to be the expression of a fury of a god... And she came here, expecting to live a quiet life?

It wasn't possible. She was a part of a god. His manifestation of righteous anger.

Eventually, either he would come for her, or she would be drawn back to him.

The mage had no future.

All she would do is turn this dead landscape into an even more charred mass. All that would be left would be the dead.

Dyys

She groaned, sitting up and holding her head.

The hangover from being drained seemed to get worse the further inland she moved. As if recovering the magic she'd lost was taking more and more effort. It made some sense. The magical matrices of the world were broken. The remaining magic was soiled by the poison of the calamity. It would take generations for it to be repaired, even with help. She wasn't sure if these people even knew if it had been disrupted.

Magical knowledge seemed to be rare.

She looked at the midday sun in surprise, and wondered why she was awake. Normally she would have slept right through to the cool of the night, only waking to dance in the moonlight, and recover some of what she'd lost.

She dragged herself upright slowly, eyes flashing around. There was something off. The ground had been disturbed. As if it had been shaken on the spot. More than that, she could see the broken lines of the magical matrix, and they were shifting. Actively moving. Something was pushing against the reality that bound this village into existence.

Dyys remembered slowly. Remembered the binding spell she'd given to Bel.

It wasn't triggered, not entirely. If Bel had managed to break the bracelet, then Dyys would have been yanked straight to her side. Instead, it had been damaged. Enough that her spirit had felt it and gone into fight-or-flight, but not enough to tell her where the silent woman actually was.

She leapt upwards onto the roof of the farmhouse easily, landing atop the chimney.

She stared in shock and horror as she saw the boulder in the middle of a nearby field. Why hadn't Jean told her it still existed? Nothing she did would have any point to it if that thing was still intact. It was what was pushing against the magical matrix. It was bound to it, poisoning it.

No wonder her head hurt, she was being poisoned as she recovered her magic.

Dyys cursed softly to herself as she saw a collapsed form near the rock.

She leapt into the air, and twisted the light around herself. She shot forward as it slammed into her, propelling her forward. She dropped from the air, rolling and holding her breath as she landed beside the stone. A stone of hellflame. Summoned by a curse designed to end the world. Summoned by the power of a god.

Dyys flicked up a hand, painting symbols into the air with rapid succession. She could see a broken attempt to shift the stone by magic. She gathered up the tendrils of the rebounded spell, binding it into the centre of the barrier. A blue light flickered and a dome appeared over the stone, containing it. Barely. She could already see cracks appearing in the surface.

She turned and looked down at the woman. The stupid woman who thought she could help. She should never have shown her how easy it was to use magic. She shouldn't have opened the doorway in the woman's head. She had to take the magic from somewhere, and like any beginner, she had taken that magic from herself. She'd risked her life, and the spell had rebounded. No human soul was equal to the will of a god.

Dyys couldn't risk moving her. If she did, then Bel would die.

She turned back to the stone in front of her. The boulder was the size of a small horse, and frozen in place. It was fixed into existence by fate itself. If you moved the ground away beneath it,

it wouldn't move. It was where it was, because that was where it was supposed to be. If you went a thousand years forward in time, you would find the same stone, in the same place, in the same condition.

Bel was now tied to the stone, and it to her. The only way to save the woman would be to break the curse on the rock.

Dyys growled angrily, raising her hands and reinforcing the barrier. She watched as the curse plucked apart the threads of her magic as if it had never been there in the first place. It tore through her magic. The pattern was changing, moving and roving. The curse was alive.

She smiled slowly, now there was something.

Living things were hers. She reached out into the curse. She felt it bite her. Felt the poison flowing into her veins. She fell onto one knee, blood pouring from her mouth. She didn't accept it. She wasn't the one being punished here. She would punish it, for hurting someone under her care, her protection.

The hairs on her head slowly began to glow and rise, floating into the air. The end of each hair swelled and split. Teeth emerged and eyes opened. The snakes hissed angrily at the curse. Dyys glared into it, into the heart of the curse. She could see the core, a desperate wish for survival. That was what had brought this curse into being. Had forced it upon the world.

The will to survive.

Dyys reached out and grabbed the curse by the throat. She felt it try and pull back from her, to release the bite and run. It was too late for that. She had it now. She took it, and she didn't kill it. She didn't try and suffocate it. She simply let it know about what it had done. She gave it a conscience, and then taught it the legend of the calamity. She told it of the dead she had seen, of the tears she had heard.

The core cracked.

The stone in front of her split in half.

Dyys released the barrier, and felt her hair fall flat against her back. She groaned, leaning forward and vomiting another mouthful of blood into the ground. She winced and looked to her right arm, seeing the twin scars now burned into her flesh where the curse had bitten her.

"Kal en is sadin." She whispered, and fell backwards onto the ground.

Bel

“Kal en is sadin.”

The words seemed to come from somewhere distant. Somewhere above and far away. She felt like she was drowning, falling deep beneath the waves of the world. She'd never been to sea, but she imagined this is what it might feel like.

She couldn't move. Couldn't try and swim.

She was too tired.

Tired enough she might slip away into the dark.

Bel gritted her teeth as she felt a sudden pain hit her. A burning on her wrist. She looked to it, and stared in surprise at the red thread. It was glowing, burning her. It was tightening.

She grabbed it, and yanked. It didn't break. She needed to break it. If she could do that, she could get the attention of the mage. They could pull her out of the water. They could save her.

The knot untwisted on it's own, and the hair became a brilliant red viper. It wrapped around her wrist tightly, and seemed to drag her arm in a direction. Bel didn't understand, but she knew the snake was trying to pull her. Trying to make her move in a direction.

She tried to swim. She really did, but she still couldn't move. She was too weak.

Fangs plunged into her hand, and she gasped a ragged breath of pain. The adrenaline surged into her, and she kicked, pathetically.

She felt her fingers touching the surface of the water, but she couldn't.

She was too...

She...

Fingers wrapped around her own, and the world exploded into painful reality.

Bel grabbed her head as she felt the wind, groaning in agony. It felt like someone had taken a sledgehammer to her, and been unrelenting.

She glared at the bright light around her, and then she saw the rock beside her. Split vertically in half. It didn't feel dangerous anymore. It felt like nothing more than any other boulder she might stumble on.

Had she done it?

Bel felt her heart nearly fail her as she saw the mage collapsed in front of her. The woman had come, and saved her. But she wasn't breathing. Her chest wasn't moving. Her skin was even more pale than it should have been.

Bel launched upright, half her body dragging behind her, and made it to the woman's side. She cupped her hand over the mouth, but she didn't feel any breath at all. She sighed and positioned her hands over the mage.

She pushed firmly, roughly. One, two, three. She put her head to the woman's chest, but couldn't hear anything.

Again.

She focused on the compressions. She didn't know enough to try the breathing. All she could do was the compressions, and hope that the lungs filled with enough air. Hope that the heart would

restart.

Again.

Tears began to run down Bel's cheeks. She was the reason this woman was dying. This selfless woman who stepped up. She came whenever Bel needed her, even though they didn't even know who each other was. They were strangers. Yet death was something the woman actively welcomed if it meant doing the right thing.

Again.

Bel gritted her teeth. She could feel the ache in her arms, the threatening to cramp. She'd been at the edge of death herself, but she would not allow the mage to go. Not as easily as this. Not when she owed her. The mage was all the hope that existed in this stupid village. She was the most important thing that had come their way in years.

Again.

Bel heard it this time. There was a flutter of a heartbeat. It wasn't steady, but it was there. She breathed out unsteadily, and positioned herself under the mage, lifting their head to try and make it easier to breathe. She wrapped her arms around her, looking down at the pale face as tears dripped down onto it. As salty droplets ran down the flawless curves of the face, and passed the mouth. Passed the fangs.

They were hard to miss. Bel hadn't questioned them. They were a mage. They could look however they chose to look. If the mage could turn a roll of bread into a chocolate chip biscuit, they could transform themselves into whatever they wanted. If she felt the need to seem like a monster, to warn people away from her, then Bel could live with that.

She felt her wrist burn, and looked down at the bracelet. It was just a hair tied into a pretty knot. She knew what she had seen wasn't real, but all the same she had still half expected to see a snake. She couldn't tell why it was burning, though. Maybe she was allergic.

She looked at the mage, at the slowly rising and falling chest, and felt relief.

Maybe they'd live through this. At least long enough that Bel could apologise for what she'd done. Why had she thought that because she'd managed to pull off half a spell she'd be able to cast a spell against a piece of the calamity?

It didn't make sense to her now. She'd been so confident before. So certain it would work.

She didn't know why.

Lilibeth

She hated travelling by gateway. She agreed it was probably necessary, to stop the immediate panic of the populace. Disappearing soldiers were less concerning than soldiers marching through the streets and into the sunset. A missing prince versus a fleeing prince. All the same, it was a horrible way to travel.

The puke was barely out of her mouth when she heard distressed shouts. She looked up, drawing her sword as she spotted an archer pointing an arrow at her. She didn't have time to react before it sailed through the air towards her. There was a flash of blue light and the projectile was knocked back. She sprinted up the hill before the bandit could knock and arrow and slammed the butt of her sword into their face, crushing their nose.

She spun around, "Take them alive!"

Her blade pointed down at the archer's neck, and they stopped reaching for their knife. She smiled at them, "That's better. Just behave. This will all be over very soon."

It was. There was no battle, no skirmish. The bandits were surprised, and overwhelmed. They didn't have a chance, even against a squad as incompetent as this one. It was only a moment before they bowed and kneeling before the prince.

Vanadreer sneered, "Shall we execute them?"

"No, respectfully." Carmichael said quickly, "They camp outside the ruins. They probably know the way into the first couple of chambers. If not, they'll help us find the way with less risk to ourselves."

The prince looked to her, "Do you agree, praetor?"

"Yes, my prince." Lilibeth said respectfully. It was ruthless, but true. They would make good fodder for the grindwheel.

Alexus

She sighed as she jumped out of the back of the carriage and landed in the tiny flyspit town. These were all that dotted the landscape now. Waystops for the people moving towards the cities in search of food and water, with a few stubborn locals trying to scrape by.

She moved off to the side of the road and reached down, grabbing the dirt. She raised it up easily, creating a small tent with a single pull. She pulled open the entrance to the dirt hovel, and stepped inside, out of the dust.

She could see some of what Dyys saw. She did pity these people. They were dead, but hadn't realised it yet. Hadn't realised that mortal world had already come to its end. That there was no more hope to be had.

Yet, they did not deserve her pity.

Almost everyone she saw, she saw their crimes. The punishments waiting for them in the Hall of the Hells. Most were minor transgressions. They would be purified and destroyed quickly. These people did not deserve the generosity of her heart, and yet she felt for them all the same. This was the risk of the mortal world. She didn't belong here. She belonged at home. She missed it. The clarity it could bring.

She heard a tap, and looked up in surprise at the face of a human in the doorway. She glared, and the human held out a handful of food to her. Alexis felt a shiver move slowly down her spine as she saw the ring of light around the woman's face. Her aura was pure. This one was already bound for paradise.

She sat up, taking the food, and nodding her thanks. The woman turned to go, and Alexis forced herself to use the Common Tongue. She couldn't resist knowing. "What is your name?"

The woman turned back, "I am Sister Guinevere, of the Temple of Sarin."

Alexis shook her head in surprise. "Thankyou... Sister."

The woman turned and left. Likely going to feed others. Some passing through town. Some staying. Some dying. That wasn't just a sister of some temple. The light meant only one thing. That woman, whether now or later, would become a saint. A blessed human who became a hero of a god by their own efforts. Someone who caught the attention of the gods by their own purity.

There were still saints in a world like this. A world dying.

That upset her. It seemed like a wasted effort. Someone like this Guinevere should be spared her existence on this plane. She should have been called home to live with the gods. Instead, they expected her to be their light in the dying world. They expected her to continue to serve them, openly and gladly. This was not the first time Alexis had felt like the gods deserved their own time in the hells.

"They probably do."

Alexis hissed, flying to her feet, and staring at the woman suddenly sitting beside her. Their hair was a soft red, and their eyes were blue. Almost transparent wings adorned their back. This was a Fae. A Fae who had transported directly to her location without any obvious way of travelling, or even knowing how to arrive.

The woman smiled at her, "Nice to meet you, Alexis. My name is Summer."

She glared, "Queen of the Fae. Why are you here, making me use this feral language?"

Summer shrugged, “Because I want to find something out.”

Alexus glared. It wasn’t exactly an answer, or not. It was a leading statement. Something to make Alexis engage her in conversation. An attempt to reduce the threat that the Fae posed. She could see the creature’s aura. She was a threat. A dangerous and angry threat.

“I could always ask my husband to talk to you instead. He thought it’d be better if I spoke to you.” Summer warned her, and Alexis glared, “Husband?”

“I married Trei.”

Alexis felt an eye twitch. “You, nothing more than an eternal, married a god?”

“We did get engaged before he ascended. . .” Summer frowned, “And my resurrection of him began the events that lead to it. . . And I’m not really just an eternal. . . So I guess. . . No? That’d be the simplest way to answer that.”

Alexis glared, “You are Fae.”

“I am also the reincarnation of Sumner.” The woman rolled her eyes, “How does that sound? Make me worth talking to, now?”

She felt a quiet chill run down her spine. “The goddess, Sumner, the embodiment of light within the ’verse, allowed herself to be reincarnated as a mere Fae?”

“She created the Fae for that purpose.” Summer shrugged, “So, I’m not sure that ‘allow’ would be the right term. Nor would ‘mere’. The Fae are Sumner’s greatest and final creation. I am the template for that creation. If you hate the Fae so much, you have to hate Sumner as well. It won’t do for you to hate one, and adore the other. Fury.”

Alexis sighed heavily, sitting down slowly, “So, creature, why do you come to me?”

“A Fae died, once.” Summer began, “His name was Tyr. His bride attempted to resurrect him. It went. . . Wrong. Tyr was drawn out of time. He became. . . Wrong. My husband defeated him recently. However. . . His bride has come up recently. Ausosa. I thought she was dead. Condemned to the Tenth Circle. Can you confirm that?”

Alexis frowned, “I don’t do that. I’m a hunter. Alexis the Unceasing. I wouldn’t know who was condemned to the circles. . . But if Ausosa was Fae, how could she be condemned to any circle of hell? The Hall of Hells is only for mortal kind.”

Summer sighed heavily, “An exception was made. I apologise for taking your time, hunter. We’ll be keeping an eye on you.”

The Fae stood, nodded politely, and vanished. She didn’t step through a shift or channel. She simply wasn’t there anymore. She moved like a god.

That a Fae, even one with celestial heritage, could marry a god. . . It was heresy. Yet, if the god did it willingly, it could not be considered heresy. This new god. . . Trei. . . He was changing things. He was an upstart.

Alexis ground her teeth together angrily. She didn’t like this.

Wrodin

He rolled on the ground, hands covering his ears. It didn't help, but it felt like it should. Like it should be able to block out the events happening around him. Without him. The events demanding his intervention. Screaming out for him to interfere in the flow of the world.

The timelines would just have to take care of themselves. He would not be drawn into this. He would not become a part of a fixed event. Something that must happen. If he did that, he would be permanently a part of events. He wouldn't be able to remain an outsider. He'd be forced to play his hand, over and over. He would be drawn back into the world, and mortals would die by his hand. He would become the god of war again. He would be forced back into his old convictions, that the ends always justified the means. That the correct application of violence and horror could be used to solve any problem.

That was a lie.

The 'verse didn't need a god of war. It didn't need war. These people were all perfectly capable of fucking themselves six ways to Sunday without his assistance. They didn't need a jealous and angry god coming at them with a battleaxe. They'd already burned out their world. They didn't need his presence to encourage them to bathe in the blood of their enemies.

He utterly refused to be the catalyst to the coming events. He would not be a pawn of any of them. Not Sarin, not Trei. Not Ausosa, if she lived. He would not be an avenue for the Fel to return to this world, to claim what belonged to that long-dead bitch.

It hadn't surprised him to hear that Ausosa was the force living inside the Fel, corrupting every soul that touched that magic. The Fel was corruption. It was the invention of a desperate man, trying to create a new race. He'd succeeded, in a way. He'd lost his own soul and mind to the Fel, and that of his creation. The orks. Yet, after hundreds of years, they'd been freed. Partially by Kru as she became a goddess and killed their creator, Drak'tur. Partially when Shannon had cured Kru, allowing the last dregs of madness in the Fel to slip away. It hadn't take Kru long to decide to cure all the orks.

That society was on the verge of collapse. They'd fled the Fel-infected homelands to this realm. A realm that was burned out by Shannon.

He didn't know what the High Priestess was. Shannon seemed to still be human. She certainly showed all the vices of a human. Yet, as nothing more than an avatar of Sarin, she'd managed to stand against Kru, the new goddess of chaos. The most powerful of all the gods. It shouldn't have been possible, and he knew a god had been in Ozandius at the time. Maybe Shannon was the new god, maybe they simply helped her. It was too hard to tell from his perspective, as a mortal.

Thrice recently, events of the worlds had all changed.

Thrice it had involved the birth of a new god.

It seemed a crapshoot whether the events turned out for better, or for worse. The events happened. Most were marred with far-reaching consequences. Yet, every event seemed to be interconnected. And now, he couldn't deny what they were connected to.

First had come the return of Tyr.

Then the infection and destruction of Eldrasa by the Fel. The third death of Tyr.

Finally the Fel had come to this world, and it was revealed that it might be controlled by Tyr's bride.

Ausosa had to be behind it... And now he felt events calling to him.

It would be better to die than to find himself between Ausosa, Summer and Luna. The three Faen sisters that were more than Fae. They represented a godhood. Summer was the power of the sun, Luna was that of the moon. Ausosa was the Dawn. She was weaker than both, but possessed the abilities of both as well. She was also just as inevitable. No mortal, like him, would be able to survive just the collateral damage if the three began to fight.

Maybe this was it.

Finally, the realms coming to an end. An end to this experiment called reality.

Maybe that was the real reason for the new generation of gods and celestials. If reality fell, they would have a chance to create a new one. To wipe away the sins and memories of this one. He should be left in the dust, his legacy forgotten. He could only hope that his stripped power did not find an heir to bear his burden. A burden that had turned him into a pawn of Ausosa. He had caused the war in Eldrasa.

He had given Ausosa her foothold in the 'verse.

And it was Shannon who managed to make repairs to his actions. A small, meek, little human girl. She had done what he could not.

Events still called to him, but he would not answer. If he helped to shape the world of tomorrow, then there would be no hope. He would simply lead to its destruction.

Dyys

She opened her eyes tiredly, staring at the ceiling before noticing how much her chest hurt. Breathing hurt, as if she'd crushed some of her ribs. One of her breasts stung like someone had punched it. That being said, as she remembered it... She'd been dying, flooded with corrupted magic.

This was an improvement.

She let out a hiss as she rolled over, clutching herself as she tried to stand up. It knocked the air out of her, but she managed.

Dyys sighed heavily, and quickly drew a symbol in the air. There was a small flash of light, and an experience that felt akin to a cold shower. A small image floated in front of her. She turned it back and forth. She had cracked three ribs. And bruised her breast. With a hand print. Or rather a pair of overlapping hand prints.

Someone had pushed on her chest, repeatedly. She hadn't heard of it, but it seemed like whoever had done it, had managed to bring her back from the edge of death. She was grateful. Unfortunately, though she could heal the cracked ribs, doing so would exhaust her all over again, and she didn't have the food she needed to recover.

She sat down painfully at the table, and drummed her fingers.

The lack of food was becoming a problem. She needed more of it, just so she could use magic to make sure they could grow more of it. She wasn't sure how to solve this one. It might not be a problem she could solve with magic.

The town wasn't close enough to trade with anyone. She doubted merchants would be by anytime soon. The closest resource would be wherever the bandits was coming from. They were as desperate as her, but they might have a small store of food.

Eliminating the bandits would make her life easier. Yet, she'd only killed the others before because they were a direct threat. She didn't want to be the mindless killer. Not anymore. She would punish if she had to, but she would not seek it out.

There had to be another solution.

She felt a tap on her shoulder, and smiled as she saw Bel. The woman smiled back, but sheepishly.

Dyys waved, "Take a seat."

Bel tiredly slid into the chair, and moved her hands simply. Dyys frowned, "No. Didn't get that... Was that your equivalent of slurring because you're exhausted?"

Bel laughed and nodded.

Dyys frowned, and sighed, "I think we're going to run out of food. Before I can restore the farm."

Bel winced, and nodded. She signed something quickly. Dyys ran the symbols over in her mind, comparing them to runes she knew to try and guess. "Something about... A mountain?"

Bel smiled and nodded. Then she made a symbol she did know. Her eyes widened and shook her head, "If there is a ruin of theirs there... I'd rather die. I probably would if we went there."

Bel shrugged.

It was a partial solution. If there was a dwergaz ruin atop, or probably beneath, a nearby

mountain, then she could probably find either charged crystals or a charging station. If she could gather that sort of magic, then she might be able to speed things up.

However, if there was a library, then she might be able to find dwergaz spells. Some of which might show her how to create food from magical energy. That might give them a real fighting chance.

“Crystals, and spells.” Dyys nodded slowly, “That’d help. If they haven’t been looted... But... Have you ever been inside?”

Bel made a symbol for yes and no.

Dyys winced, “So, you got in, but not all the way. What stopped you? Traps?”

Bel shook her head, and then drew the outline of a large figure on the tabletop with her fingertip.

Dyys swallowed nervously, “Oh. Kilan da gasta. There’s a living Guardian. Well, on the plus side, that probably means looters haven’t got very far. On the other side, the dwergaz were wiped out by their own Guardians.”

Bel smiled tightly.

Dyys rolled her eyes, “Let me guess. The bandits camp out in the entrance.”

Bel nodded.

Dyys drummed her fingers. It would be suicide for just about anyone. Yet, it would give her the space she needed to get things done here. To protect Bel from herself, as well.

She stood up slowly, and ran a hand through her hair, “I’ve got two cracked ribs. So, I’m not going to be moving very fast. But, all the same... I need you to stay here. You’ve saved me once. You can’t do it this time.”

Bel glared at her. Dyys rolled her eyes, “I know you’ve been there before. A guide would be helpful, but I’m not risking it. Not in a dwergaz ruin. Stay here. Wait for me... And for the love of the gods, don’t try any more magic.”

Bel winced sheepishly, and nodded.

Dyys patted her head, “Hey. I shouldn’t have shown you. Not without the right warnings. Magic is... Dangerous. It’s also surprisingly easy.”

Bel swatted her hand away and made a sign that she would stay put.

Dyys rolled her shoulders, “Right, then. Wish me luck.”

Bel

She didn't like to see the mage leave. Especially right after they both nearly died. Yet, the mage knew what she was doing. That was obvious. The mage had managed to break a calamity stone.

Bel knew she didn't understand magic yet, but when she had tried to move the stone, she'd felt the entire world snap back into her face. As if the entire world had shifted all at once. All except her.

The mage had nearly died, but she'd broken a stone without the spell turning into a rebound.

She hadn't wanted to tell her about the ruin, but she felt like she had to. She was scared the mage would walk in and murder everyone there. They were just bandits to her. Not desperate people, pushed to their limits. Just people, trying to get by in world gone wrong.

She was also scared that the mage was right. The dwergaz had been completely wiped out, generations ago. Nobody knew much about the ancient people. All that was left were their creations. Things like the Guardians. Devices built just to defend their homes. Devices that somehow malfunctioned and decided to eliminate everything they came across.

There were very few people to have ever encountered a dwergaz Guardian and survive. So few she even knew the names of some of them, and she was just a country hick.

She had to hope the mage knew what she was doing.

Hope. There was something she hadn't felt in a very long time. The idea that tomorrow could be better than today. She'd given up on that. Somehow, this mage had changed all that.

It wasn't the magic she brought. Magic always came with costs. Sometimes involving villages, torches and pitchforks.

It was the confidence. That the mage believed all problems could be solved, with the right attitude and the right tools. The mage heard a fucking Wachterin was guarding a dwergaz stronghold, and she still went to face it. Because it was one part of a solution.

"She's fought Wachterin before."

Bel froze up. She hadn't heard anyone enter the room. She could always hear. There wasn't a person alive who could tiptoe passed her.

She turned her head slowly, looking at the chair at the end of the table, and the woman sitting there, smiling at her.

Bel signed quickly.

The woman laughed, "Appropriate response. I am the fuck. And I, am Sarin. Last of the Fates. Not really a god. A celestial. I've watched over your world since I helped put it back together."

Bel glared, signing slowly, "Why are you here?"

"I'm here, because Dyys isn't." Sarin shrugged, "Because... Sometimes, hope matters. A tiny ray of hope can change everything. In a single moment, hope can change the course of the 'verse. You deserve that kind of hope."

Bel punched a hand on the table, "Where have you been!? Our world is dying!"

"I'm partly to blame for that." Sarin smiled sadly, "And I am fixing it. Piece by piece. I can't be everywhere, and I can't just fix it straight away. There are rules. There are other things at play. You have every right to be hurting. To be angry. All I can tell you is that the alternative, was even

worse. Much worse.”

Bel gestured, “Worse!? How could it be worse!?”

“You’re not enslaved to a will of corrupted magic that drains the life out of everything it touches, for starters.”

She paused, and sighed. The Fate probably had done what she could. Done what she needed to. All the same. So many people she knew... Were gone. So many people had died. Izak. Others.

Sarin smiled at her, “I wanted you to know hope. So, let me tell you this. Whilst Dyys doesn’t know, and you probably shouldn’t tell her just yet, I have her back. She’s important to me. She’s a part of the plan to fix this world. I’m not about to let her die by the hands of a dwergaz automaton.”

Bel looked at the woman, and shook her head, smiling. She raised her hands, “Does she need your help?”

“Probably not.” Sarin laughed, “But she has it, all the same. Just like you.”

“What?”

Sarin rolled her eyes, “When you were fading out, dying, someone grabbed your hand and pulled you back here. That was me. You are important, Bel. Without you, the world won’t recover. With you, it stands a chance against... Things. Things that will happen.”

Bel glared. She did not like how vague the woman was being. She also didn’t like the sound of the responsibility being dropped on her shoulders.

Sarin smiled, “This might be the middle of nowhere, Bel. It might seem like an unimportant place. You might not want to be important. None of those things matter. This plain will soon be a witness to a changing point in history. I can’t even change that. It’s a fixed moment. It has to happen.”

Bel sighed heavily. She was certain now. The gods were cruel. They played with the lives they were responsible for. They pushed and pulled. Sarin wasn’t here to make her feel better. Sarin was here to let her know things were going to go sideways, and that there was absolutely nothing she could do about it. All she could do was relax, and let the gods slowly fuck her.

“Why?”

Sarin smiled slowly, “Why? Why are you important? Or why is something going to happen here? I guess the answers rely on each other. You’re important, because... Because you met the mage. Because the mage is willing to risk her life for yours. As long as that happens, you are just as important to keep safe as she is. And a whole heap of bullshit will rain down on you from the bloody Void because the mage is here. If you want to escape everything... Make her move on.”

Bel glared.

So this was it. A choice. She was being offered a choice which wasn’t a choice. To act like a jerk towards someone who saved her life, and represented hope in the world, or to be drawn into some sort of celestial grudge match.

“Does she stand a better chance with me, or without?”

Sarin stood up grinning, “What do you think? See you later, Bel.”

Lilibeth

There was no warning. No time to react. The floor just suddenly melted upwards into the air, and became something alive. The first two bandits were instantly beheaded. The next became nothing but shrapnel.

Lilibeth yelled, grabbing a shield and charging forward. She had to distract it. Give it a target to concentrate on. Let the others have a chance of getting by. She just prayed that Carmichael knew what she was doing and would help her.

The shield may as well have been paper. It dissolved the moment the Wachterin struck it. Then the same fist struck her. She was launched into the wall, collapsing. Her legs ignored her urgent screams. Her arms couldn't move either. She just flopped to the ground, watching as the blood pooled around her. Unable to see the creature. Unable to see if the prince was safe. If anyone was helping him.

Her curiosity was rewarded, as the darkness began to close in around the edges of her vision. She heard a roar like a wyrm out of legend, and fire blistered over her. Strangely, she couldn't feel the fire. It had to be Carmichael. Doing a damn better job of distracting the creature than she had. Maybe she'd bought him the time to fire off the spell. Maybe the prince could -

The flames cut off. Carmichael screamed somewhere. Somewhere distant. No. No it just felt distant because her hearing was almost gone. She was dying. Barely clinging on to life at all.

This wasn't the death of a glorious praetor.

It was the death of an unnamed soldier, fighting for a lost cause. The dwergaz machines were simply on another level. No human could fight them and succeed. There wasn't any possibility of it. Never had been.

She'd known it might end this way. She'd hoped she'd survive long enough to know if the prince would.

At least until the prince...

She collapsed, memories becoming confused and jumbled. She heard a ragged gasp, and wondered who had died. Before she realised it was her own voice.

That felt strange.

The shadows swarmed in around her, and she felt like she was falling. Tumbling and spinning, head over heel. Moving back and forth without rhyme or reason. This wasn't what she'd expected death to feel like. She wasn't sure what she expected, but this wasn't it.

If Meria was to claim her... Maybe a bright light? A long tunnel?

If she was doomed to hell... Bursting out of the dirt? Burning gates?

Not... Falling.

She was still falling. And beginning to get queasy. Hating that she could get queasy after she'd gone and died. That just seemed like an unnecessary cruelty. Maybe this was supposed to be her personal hell. That might make sense.

A person flashed into view as she tumbled. Continued to flash into view. It looked like someone was standing still whilst she spun in the air in front of them. Maybe she wasn't falling. Just being tortured.

"Can't you stop that, you're making me feel dizzy."

Lilibeth went to speak, but instead vomited and instantly regretted it as her spinning face ploughed straight into it.

“Oh gross.” The newcomer said again, “Fine. I’ll help you out.”

A hand gripped her ankle, and Lilibeth felt it instantly snap. The spinning stopped, and she hung upside down, limply, from her broken ankle. Her eyes watered from the pain, but she managed to keep herself together. She blinked furiously, trying to shake the feeling of spinning.

The newcomer dropped her onto an invisible floor, and stepped back, screwing up her nose, “Geeze. What did you eat? That reeks.”

Lilibeth reached instinctively for her sword belt, and groaned as she found herself naked. Of course she was naked. She was dead. You didn’t get to take anything with you.

“Not quite true. You have your necklace.”

She reached up, finding the goddess’ token in surprise, “So Meria will claim me?”

“Mmm... No.” The newcomer replied, “Well. Maybe. Not now, anyway. And now is what you should care about.”

Lilibeth forced herself half upright, flinching at the pain from her shattered ankle, “Why am I feeling pain? Why aren’t I... Anywhere?”

The newcomer smiled at her, “Oh you’re somewhere. You’re in the Void. The place beyond places. The one place where direction and space and distance mean ash. Sorry. Human swearword... Shit. Distance means shit.”

She sighed heavily, analysing the figure in front of her, “You’re a Fae.”

“Not quite.” They grinned at her, “But close. I’m a goddess. I was Fae. Not anymore. Now I’m... Me. Everywhere, nowhere. Same voiden thing to me. You on the other hand, well... You’re screwed. Killed by a Wachterin. Even after I went to all the effort to make sure Carmichael knew it was there. You have no idea how hard it is to make him notice things. I dropped the same book on his head three times before he even looked at the cover.”

Lilibeth winced, “Kru. You’re Kru.”

“Yes.” The Fae grinned, “And... Well. How do I put this? I’m why you’re here. Meria wanted to claim you. So did Trei. Sarin wanted to resurrect you to save your stupid little prince so her stupid little plans wouldn’t go to waste. I... Disagreed. I thought you’d earned your death. I’m not having someone screw up everything I’ve done by bringing you back. The prince, I need. Thankfully, Sarin has helped with that particularly ashen situation. Maybe. He has a chance.”

Lilibeth sighed, “You’re trying to make them send me to hell. Why?”

“Intelligent.” Kru nodded, “That’s part of why. I was thinking you could cause some chaos for me, down there. I am the goddess of chaos. I also have a vested interest in screwing with the god that rules in the Hall of the Hells. A decent fighter, given my divine strength, might actually make it passed a demon or two. Heck, you might even manage to survive ten seconds against a Fury. That’d be a song for the ages.”

Lilibeth winced, “Did I save the prince?”

“Oh void.” Kru sighed, sitting down suddenly, “You do care. I was hoping that wasn’t the case.”

“I care for the mission.” Lilibeth snapped, “I am a servant of Meria.”

Kru shook her head, “Yeah, I wasn’t actually listening to you. You can say whatever you feel like. It doesn’t matter. I’m a god. You’re human. Heck, you don’t even have magic. You are completely unimportant. Your life happens because we dictate that it does. Anyways, where was I? Ah. Right. Aurili. That’s a name written on your heart. Who is she? I can’t... See her. Is she dead?”

“Maybe.” Lilibeth sighed, “She’s a Praetor, like I was. A leader of the Balavidian military. We were... Expecting a coup, when we left.”

Kru looked off, “Huh. Fugan is on fire. The Rozanthen river is on fire too. Gods you must throw a lot of crap in it. People can walk on your river? That is seriously gross.”

Lilibeth sighed, “If you can’t see her, then maybe she is dead.”

Kru glared at her, “That’s it? I tell you that your true love is dead and you just shrug it off? What the void is wrong with you?”

She looked at the Faen goddess in surprise, “True love?”

Kru rolled her eyes, “Luminosity. Did you not even realise?”

“I knew...” Lilibeth began, “I knew I liked her. But she swore an oath of celibacy to Wrodin.”

“That damned tool.” Kru spat, “He isn’t even a god anymore. Punished with mortality. Heck, if you waited a few hours before charging into this death trap, you might have met him. That vow your friend took, doesn’t mean anything anymore.”

Lilibeth flinched, barely understanding. A god could no longer be a god? A god could become mortal? How in the ’verse did that work? They knew how everything fit together. The magic they must be able to perform would be... Astounding.

“Not as breathtaking as you might think.” Kru grinned, “Mortality is very... Confining. So is a physical body. It limits what you can do. Summer is queen of the Fae, but she’s also the reincarnation of Sumner. She’s not a hundred thousandth of what she was. Still, she has the power of a god. She just can’t touch it. It’d burn her out and kill her before she even tried. Not that it stops her trying every now and then.”

The praetor smiled softly, “So. Are you going to let me die, now?”

“Haven’t made up my mind.” Kru glared, “Because, you see, Aurili isn’t in the hells. She’s not in the Void, either. She’s not on the continent. I can’t see her in any of the realms. Which doesn’t make sense. So until it is, I’m going to keep you as... Prisoner isn’t the right word. Maybe... Pet. A neglected pet. Enjoy.”

As the Fae vanished, Lilibeth felt herself begin to fall again.

That utter bitch.

Alexus

She looked to her left and rolled her eyes. She was walking along the road, towards where her target had gone. She wasn't that far out now, but it was becoming very obvious that the gods were extremely interested in her and the target. They weren't just watching her, they were interrogating her.

Another stranger had appeared out of nowhere, keeping pace with her as if she weren't moving faster than any human could.

This one was Elfin. Her ears were pulled back along her head, but from the way her loping stride was drifting, Alexis was getting the distinct impression that the elf was actually slowing down for her. She was impressed. She hadn't ever expected someone to be able to match her in physical strength.

"I am Alphege. A friend of Summer and Trei." The elf spoke stiffly, making the language sound almost lyrical. Alexis felt a spark of irrational jealousy. How could an elf be so much more graceful in Alexis' own tongue?

Alexis glared at her, "So you have come to entertain me with your death?"

The elf laughed, "No. I have come to ask you my own questions. Trei was kind enough to place me in your path. I wish to ask you of the Fel. Many who have fallen into the hells must have come from the infection."

"I am not that kind of Fury." Alexis growled angrily, "Why do none of you comprehend that? I am a hunter. I drag souls back to the hells. I do not torture anyone."

"Oh, I know." Alphege grinned at her, "The answers are unimportant to the questions. Your behaviour is what I'm watching, Fury. I am trying to assess how much of a threat you are. I have already lost one world. My home was destroyed by the Fel. Most of my race has been wiped out. The few who survive, serve a woman I am not entirely sure has the best interests of anyone but herself at heart."

Alexis smiled slowly, "You are refugees in this world. How the mighty have fallen. What happened to the elfin empire that dared to raid our hall? The one that stole the soul of a king and took it home?"

Alphege glared at her, "So you are the Fury who hunted our king. Dragged him back to the Hall of Hells."

"Yes." Alexis laughed, "And my target is the Fury who purified his soul before its destruction."

Alphege shrugged, "I'm aware. Dyys did not set foot in the mortal plane without first being allowed to by the gods who watch over it. The same goes for you. Your king, your Marked One, had to ask approval before you arrived. It has been granted, but not indefinitely, and not without conditions. If I, or any of the others, decides you pose too great a threat, then you will be evicted. You will not be able to return. You are a powerful mage, but you are just a mage."

Alexis thought for a moment. The rough ground passed beneath her feet easily. She moved over the loose stones and uneven terrain as if it were smooth and flat. It did make some sense that her presence was only possible by invitation. Even this new god, Trei, need not worry about her attempting to fight him. He was a god. It was not her place to fight him. If he forbade her, she would do what he requested.

"I am not a threat to any but my target." Alexis growled, "I agreed to obey the local laws.

Only those who make themselves into a threat upon my life need worry.”

Alphege laughed, “Yeah. . . There’s a lot of those. Some of them might actually be on the list of people we don’t want you to kill. Under any circumstances. See, to most of these people, you are a monster.”

“Of course.” Alexis shrugged. That was unsurprising. She was a monster. She was a Fury from the Hall of the Hells. To all mortals she represented the inevitable punishment for their sins. She was the embodiment of their guilt. Attacking her would seem to them to be a reasonable response.

Alphege sighed heavily, “You’re determined, are you not? That your target be taken back with you.”

“It is the law.” Alexis replied, evenly. She would never question carrying out her duty. She did not question those that were placed above her. She served the Mark, in all things. The assumption of these newcomers that she might not do as she was required, that she would hesitate to do what was ordered of her, was an insult. In normal circumstances she would consider a duel, however that did not seem to fit with the laws of the land.

“A duel?” Alphege grinned, “We could, you know. I wouldn’t be averse to testing myself against you. If you can pin me, without killing me, I’ll apologise.”

Alexis slowed to a stop, looking carefully at the elf, “You wish to fight me? Would this not be beyond the kindness that Trei has extended to my mission in this place?”

Alphege shrugged, “He’ll be irritated with me, not you. But probably not surprised.”

Alexis considered it. She did desire an apology. She was also curious how strong a warrior could be fielded by the peoples of this realm. If there were other elfin as strong as this one, they might be capable of becoming a threat to her.

However, the non-lethal nature of the suggested duel was not something she was experienced with.

The elf raised her hand, and a spear slapped into it from somewhere.

Alexis blinked in surprise, “Is that. . . ?”

“The Algar spear.” Alphege smiled, “Last remaining piece of Yggdrasil.”

The Fury smiled at the elf, “Well. This is an honour. You must be the elfin Guardian of the Shrine. I will gladly break your spirit.”

The elf moved her feet into a fighting stance, “I am prepared.”

She snapped forward against the wind, shattering the road behind her in an instant. Yet still, she found the spear in her way, blocking her and tossed her to the side. She rotated in the air, barely avoiding the edge of the blade slitting open her ankle.

She landed on her fingertips, spinning quickly. She kicked the spear up and out of the elf’s hands. Alexis shot forward, her claws raking for the face. Yet, she found the elf not only disarmed, but apparently unfazed. A fist snapped into her face, knocking her back. The spear of Algar landed nearby, but the elf didn’t even reach for it. She snapped two punches into Alexis’ chest, knocking her backwards and out of breath.

Alexis glared. She’d sparred against very few people who were strong enough to even make her notice their existence. Finding someone who could deliver a blow at close to her level was a complete shock. She had been the one insulting the elf, by not taking the threat she represented

seriously. Alexis hardened herself, and snapped forward again. This time the air shattered as she moved through it with a deafening sound. She grabbed the elf by the shoulders and slammed her forehead into them.

There was a crack as their skulls met, dazing the elf. As the woman blinked, an uppercut slammed into the bottom of her jaw. Before the body even began to rise an axe kick came down on the woman's shoulder, driving her to her knees. As she landed, Alexis' knee slammed upwards into their face.

The elf was knocked backwards, but as she did, she flipped upright. Alexis flinched as she felt the deft feet slam into her jaw, tossing her backwards. She hit the ground with a groan, and disappointment. The elf had done in one motion all the damage she had inflicted in her several smaller attacks. The elf was conserving her energy. Still trying to test how strong Alexis was. She wasn't taking this fight seriously, not yet. She was allowing herself to be hit, to judge how fast and hard that Alexis could hit.

She needed to end this fight, immediately. That was the only way to exploit this underestimation of her abilities.

Her hair began to glow a brilliant red. Each individual hair floated upwards, the ends splitting. Forming jaws and eyes. The scales rippled downwards as the snakes awoke. Alexis took a hold of the surge in magic, enhancing herself. She shot forwards again, moving through the air without resistance. The air flowed through her, rather than splitting around her. Her fist slammed home before the elf could react, knocking her onto her back foot. Her knee slammed towards the ribs, but slammed into something far more solid.

Alexis stepped backwards into a defensive stance, glaring at the spear in the elfin hand.

The elf took the invitation to attack. The spear slammed sideways into her, cracking her ribs before she could even begin to move to block the blow. The blade slammed into her front foot, pinning her to the ground. The elf's skull slammed into hers with a headbutt that she felt all the way down her spine. She fell to the ground, still pinned in position, and a foot came down across her face.

Alexis felt herself slam into the ground with a spray of blood.

The spear yanked out of her foot, and the blade rested against her throat.

Alexis glared up the length at the elf. She didn't want to say it, or admit it. She was supposed to be the unrelenting. Yet, if she persisted, the elf might well kill her by accident. The chasm between their skill levels was beyond obvious. This elf was a terrifying weapon of war.

The Fury swore quietly and then sighed, "I surrender."

Alphege withdrew the spear, and grinned down at her. "Thanks for the exercise. It has been a very long time since anybody has made me even try. These days it seems like only Fae and gods can match me."

Alexis took the proffered hand and pulled herself to her feet. She looked down at the pierced foot and the leather foot around it, and sighed heavily. She flashed a healing spell easily, and then released the magic. Her hair collapsed over her shoulders, and she pulled a comb from a pocket. She brushed it and began walking towards her target again. "You are beyond my capabilities to defeat, elf. I am. . . Impressed."

"Irritated." Alphege corrected, "Don't take it too hard, Fury. I spar with gods on a regular basis. I'm not exactly average for this world. I'm capable of defeating many opponents that you

would never consider fighting.”

“I would not fight the gods, you are correct.” Alexis snapped. The elf was right. She was irritated. Irritated by the casual heresy that fell from her lips. Gods could not be defeated. Not by those who were themselves not gods. There was no limit to a gods ability. It was only a god’s own desire to follow self-imposed laws that would allow them to ever be beaten. Yet this elf. . . Perhaps Trei allowed her to win, now and then.

“You’ll need to forget some things, if you’re going to survive here.” Alphege said cautiously, “I don’t mean to insult you, Fury. Just to warn you. Many things that you have been taught, by your Marked One, won’t work in this world. You’re hunting another Fury. Has there ever been a Fury willing to break your laws before?”

“No.” Alexis sighed heavily, “No Fury has ever insulted our creator is this fashion.”

“Then you don’t know what she’s capable of.” Alphege shrugged, “She had the imagination to see beyond the life your creator intended for her. That may be heresy, and it might even be worth punishing, but it makes her more dangerous than you. Because she can see beyond what you have both been taught. She’ll be able to employ tactics that you would never even begin to consider.”

“I am aware.” Alexis rolled her eyes, “I am not naive, no matter how you may consider me, elf. I know that Dyys shall not be the sister I knew before. The woman I knew would never have been able to consider betraying her service or lord. She was steadfast and uncompromising.”

Alphege raised an eyebrow, “She’s your sister?”

Alexis closed her eyes in regret for a moment. “Yes. There are four of us. We are the. . . Marked One’s preferred tools. Each of us is from a differing profession. I am the hunter, Dyys is the purifier.”

Alphege nodded, “Sorry. I’m not meaning to pry, just to understand. If you have to bring the level of a fight you brought against me. . . I am concerned about innocents that may get caught in crossfire between the two of you. It is difficult enough to avoid killing your opponent at this sort of skill level. Protecting others would no doubt bring injury to yourself. Injury that Dyys may not be willing to allow you to inflict on her.”

Alexis shrugged, “She will be given a chance to come willingly. It may be possible for innocents to run.”

Alphege rolled her jaw, “Yeah. . . Except I’m pretty sure at least one of them will try and fight you instead. And even if you held back. . . Humans are incredibly fragile.”

Alexis laughed, remembering the man she’d killed on the beach. “Yes. They are.”

The elf shrugged, “Well. . . My time is up. Enjoy the walk. The rest of us will talk about you some more. We might need to. . . Introduce some safety measures.”

She didn’t like the sound of it, yet she had no choice. Whatever Trei decided would occur. Alexis could not conceive of disobeying him. She did not know if Dyys would allow the safety measures to be used. She did not know what her sister was planning. The sister she knew would not have killed six guards and broken down the gates of hell to escape.

Wrodin

He looked over at the farmer walked up the hill and waved.

Jean smiled at him, "How have you been, old man?"

Wrodin shrugged, looking out, "I am tired. When does your mage leave?"

Jean blinked, "Eh? I wouldn't have thought you'd carry around that bit of prejudice."

"Not prejudice." Wrodin shook his head, "I have no problem with mages. Just this one. She is a dangerous thing, Jean. She brings death behind her. Destruction will come to this place if she does not leave soon."

Jean shrugged, "Ain't that all mages? She can help us."

Wrodin gritted his teeth, "Bel almost died today because of her. Because the mage taught her magic. Is that really what you want? A woman who teaches magic to anyone who asks? Magic is a dangerous thing, Jean. Gods know we've seen it enough lately. Fires burning the skies. That was magic."

Jean started, "Bel can use magic?"

"Everyone can." Wrodin sighed, "Not everyone should."

Jean swallowed nervously, "She taught Bel magic. That's..."

"If you don't get rid of her, she will be the death of us." Wrodin stated, "There is no way around that, Jean. It isn't her fault, but it is what she is. Death will follow her across this world. No matter how far she goes, how far she runs, death will follow this mage. It is unfair. But we don't all get to choose the way we are born. She's running, Jean. Running from her fate. That's why she's a danger."

The farmer sighed heavily, "You ain't giving me much. Tossing up excuses. What do you know about her? What exactly is it she's running from?"

Wrodin shrugged, "If I tell you, it might shake your world. It won't be easy to accept."

Jean glared, "I accepted you. God who ain't a god. My god who ain't a god no more. I'll listen."

"She's a demon." Wrodin said reluctantly, "One of the one's who punishes you in the hells."

Jean coughed nervously, and seemed to be thinking it over slowly. Understanding the implications. "So... You be telling me that hell is sending someone to get her back. That she ain't supposed to have left. That they'll be sending something worse than her to get her."

"Yes." Wrodin nodded grimly, "And whoever they send... They won't care about you or I. If we accidentally get in their way, even the smallest amount, they'll kill without hesitation. Life and death doesn't mean a whole heap to those who deal with it the way a demon does. Death is just a doorway. So pushing someone through it isn't really something worth thinking about to them."

Jean sighed heavily, "Dyys will try and protect us, won't she?"

"She will." Wrodin nodded, "And it might get you killed. She doesn't understand how weak humans are. I'm barely anything now. Just a mage. Yet my power, my strength, that astonishes you all the time... I'm less than her. In a fight between me and Dyys... I might land a couple punches. And then she'd kill me. Probably be an accident. She won't try and hurt me. But she will. Demons aren't supposed to be here, Jean. There's a good reason they're separated from the

other realms. Look around at you, at this dead world. It won't support humanity much longer. Humans will die out if we don't manage to find an answer... But demons could live here without any changes. They won't find it difficult."

Jean looked at him in surprise, "She eats, just like us."

"Yes and no." Wrodin shrugged, "She needs magical energy. She can get it by eating. She could also get it by killing something and eating the soul. If she ate a human soul she'd be set for a couple months. If she ate another demon, probably a year."

Jean's face went white. As if he had forgotten that demons were soul-eaters.

"I'm sorry, Wrodin." Jean shrugged, "I already agreed to have her. I ain't going to let prejudice tell me to move her on."

Wrodin nodded, "You are an honourable man. An idiot, but honourable."

Dyys

She crept silently up the hill. She could see sleeping bags and cooking equipment near the entrance to the cave system. She couldn't see any of the bandits yet, and she was hoping to avoid them all. The Wachterin would be bad enough. If any of the dwergaz inventions survived, she'd be in for a hellish time. It'd be just like the training grounds at home, and she hated them with a passion.

She paused, standing behind a pillar and glancing around. There were a few pieces of the ruin here, in the camp. A few unsunken stone slabs, pillars. Evidence of the incredible society the dwergaz had managed to raise, before their war with the Fae had led to their own destruction. Yet, little evidence of the bandits. There were no signs of violence. The bandits might be away, but it'd be normal to lead a couple scouts behind, even if things were desperate.

If they'd managed to wake up one of the automatons, there would be blood and fire everywhere. Unless it was one of the rarer creations. An experimental creation for the war against the Fae. She'd heard a few tall stories about machines that could drain the magic from an enemy, leaving nothing but ash behind. With the winds today, there'd be no ash left. However, she'd never given those stories much stock. Draining magic was difficult and used more magic than you gained. There were more efficient ways to kill someone, and the dwergaz were all about efficiency. That didn't preclude the possibility. Dead-end experiments happen. It just made it less likely.

The best answer was that the bandits had willingly entered the cave system. Maybe they were hiding there from something they'd seen. She glanced back to the road at the bottom of the mountain. She could see it easily enough from here, but the hard-packed dirt didn't tend to leave tracks behind. She hadn't noticed any on her way up here. Didn't mean the bandits hadn't seen anything.

She was delaying.

The best option was to stop overthinking everything and step into the caves. To move in and find how many automatons were still moving. Creatures that could track her heartbeat through any wall and any darkness. Unrelenting. She'd either have to outrun them, or destroy them.

There always some automatons left standing.

Dyys turned and sprinted into the darkness. Her eyes lit up with a red glow as she entered. She looked around at the walls. The somewhat familiar golden bricks of the dwergaz surrounded her. Solid gold bricks. However, most were inscribed with various runes and they still held power. Those that didn't would have long since been looted. There were gaps in the walls, a missing brick here and there, but it was mostly intact.

If the bricks were holding their power that well, there was a good chance the rest of the ruin was intact. That made her a little more hopeful that the library might contain the spells she wanted. It also made it more likely she'd run into something she couldn't stop before she found them. The dwergaz machines only very rarely left the ruins. Running away into the open was usually an option. Usually.

She moved around the corner, crouching in the near total darkness, seeing everything clearly.

She wished she couldn't.

Some of the bandits were, dead. Something had torn their heads off, sending them rolling across the ground. They'd been taken by surprise. Maybe the others had run in to help. There were three fresh corpses. A few older bones, but not many. They'd all been taken apart at head height. They'd been standing. A sheet of lightning could have done it, a trap embedded in the wall,

triggered by a misstep. Or it could have been something strong and tall.

Dyys moved quietly and slowly across the ground, feeling the edge of each stone tile. If the mortar was missing, then she avoided the tile. It might be one that was trapped. It might just be old. There wasn't a way to tell. The dwergaz hadn't painted helpful runes on the traps. They hadn't needed to. No dwergaz needed to leave the underground city. They'd just sent the automatons to do it for them. Machines that could remember everything you told them, no matter how complex. The traps were mechanical. The walls contained every kind of basic spell. The trap could trigger any number in any sequence.

She paused near the end of the hallway. Every single tile was missing the mortar. Which usually meant there was only one safe place to step, and she'd have to guess. She could jump over, but then she'd still be landing on possibly trapped tiles. Usually one that wouldn't kill her in new and interesting ways. It was a leap of faith. She didn't feel like trusting anyone that much, least of all herself.

The smart thing would be to retreat, and give up on this idea.

Yet, Bel needed her. The farm was doomed without her efforts. They needed her to fix it, and move on before the hunter found her. She didn't want to draw them into her life, and her expectations. Her own freedom was only temporary. The hunter would find her, subdue her, and drag her in front of the Mark. She wanted to be alone in the countryside when that happened.

Whatever came, she should be able to survive it. She'd fought Wachterin before, more than an age ago. Before her people created the hells, before the Marked has created paradise for humankind. When they fought alongside them.

She sighed and stood up, stepping forward.

The trap triggered. There was a snap of steel as the air around her neck became a razor thin sheet of metal, from wall to wall. Dyys rolled her eyes, standing atop it. She was faster than the ancient magic could assemble anything. At least, for now.

She jumped forward onto the ground, and hit it running. As long as she could stay ahead of the wave, she'd be fine.

Bel

She sat down slowly, smiling sadly. The tears came instantly, silently, as she looked at the small stone she'd used as a marker. There were so many graves here. People she knew, friends, family. This stone always stood out to her. Always called her over.

She didn't need to say anything.

She never had. Not to Izak. He'd always known her, what was on her mind. He'd turn and smile at her, and say something clumsy. It was never quite the right thing to say, but it had made her feel... Better. He'd say something stupid, but she'd understand. She missed him. Missed his smile, his laugh. Missed the way he could help her understand, because right now... She didn't. She didn't understand anything.

She didn't understand what was coming, or why it scared her so much.

She couldn't comprehend why she cared so much about a random stranger who'd walked into her life. Why she wanted the mage to stay. Hells. She didn't understand why she kept thinking that if the mage left, she would go with her. Why she wanted to go with her.

She'd never wanted to leave her home before.

She was beyond happy in the valley. It had been her world before the calamity, and it had stayed that way afterwards. Goblins and bandits and fuck all food hadn't been enough to make her leave. It had just made her more determined.

Now there was a hope of healing it... She was willing to go.

It didn't make sense.

She didn't look behind her as she heard Jean's footsteps. He was back, and there was something on his mind. He wouldn't interrupt her. Not here. He'd give her the space to be alone with her thoughts. To remember Izak. But it was only delaying the inevitable. The man was anxious.

It wouldn't surprise her if he knew something. Sarin had come to her of all people. She was unimportant. Even the importance the gods were placing on her life was just her proximity to the mage. She was the one everyone cared about. Dyys.

Bel dropped her head.

She wished she could ask Izak what she was supposed to do.

Ask him why she always felt so incredibly sad every time her thoughts turned to the mage. To someone who could fight any battle thrown her way. A person who could walk into a dwergaz ruin without a second thought or preparation. Why did she feel sad?

It was if some part of her pitied the woman. Pitied the brutal warrior who could kill without a single thought. Pitied the woman who smiled and turned bread to honey. She pitied someone who acted as if the world wasn't dying. Acted as if she was just enjoying her day to day life.

That didn't make sense.

What was it she could tell about the mage? Was it all an act? Was she noticing something desperate in the mage? Or was she just projecting? Trying to imagine what she would feel if she was her?

No. None of that.

She felt sorry for the mage, because of what Sarin had said. Bel's own important came simply

from the fact the mage would risk her life for hers. She didn't deserve it. She felt sad because the mage would throw her life away for someone who had never mattered in the first place. She felt sad because she was a rock, and pulling the mage down. Eventually, she would drown her.

For her own sake, the mage needed to move on.

The thought didn't mean much. She didn't understand why the mage would risk her life for hers. There was nothing tying the woman here. Nothing for her except helping people.

The mage might actually be selfless.

Bel stood up slowly, brushing off her knees, and turned. She signed in the air, "Jean?"

The farmer bowed his head, "Wrodin mentioned some things happened today. I'm worried."

Bel rolled her eyes, "That man can go jump off a cliff."

She began walking back towards the farmhouse, and Jean kept pace besides her, "Bel... You did magic. You don't understand why that would worry me?"

"I was trying to fix the rock."

Jean frowned, "Rock? Fix? The stone from the calamity. You tried to fix it? What in the blazes were you thinking, Bel!?"

"I wasn't." She signed angrily, "I nearly died. I know, Jean. The mage had to save me. She broke the rock, by the way. Healed the corruption. I was an idiot. She... She was what we need."

Jean sighed heavily, processing the flurried signals, "I don't know, Bel. I think asking the mage to stay was a mistake."

She spun, slapping him.

Then Bel turned and stalked off.

She didn't know why she'd done that. He was right, mostly. Yet, he was right for all the wrong reasons. He was afraid of the danger that the mage might be bringing with her. The problems she might create just by trying to help them. None of that was fair. Bel and Jean were dangers to the mage. Whatever happened, the mage would risk her life for them. That wasn't fair. Wasn't remotely fair.

Why would the mage do that?

Bel had never met a truly selfless person. Everyone had something they wanted, some reason for doing what they did. Even if you thought it was a selfless act, it would turn out the person enjoyed doing whatever they did.

Dyys had to have a motivation.

Alexus

She could see a distant hilltop from here, amongst many. That was where she was headed. Just beyond it, to a mountain. That was where the target was. Where the target was fighting.

Alexus could feel it. She couldn't see it, but she knew where Dyys was because of this feeling. She knew that the traitor was fighting for her life against something. That she was injured.

That was disturbing her. She should be sleeping, preparing to make a final leg of it in the morning, to finally confront the traitor, and begin to drag her back to hell. Yet, the fact something could injure Dyys wasn't something she'd considered.

The elf had handed her ass to her, fair enough, but Dyys was a fighter. She knew how to hurt people. She was a dangerous force in this world. No human would pose a threat to her. Hells, no mob of humans would pose a threat. Out here, they were a long way from the elfin and orks hunkering down in the ruins of the Ozandian kingdom. Swarms of goblins were a possibility, but they wouldn't be able to make Dyys so desperate.

It had to be something else, something more.

Though, if Dyys was killed, it would make her job much easier. She'd be able to claim the corpse and return home without a fight. Without her loyalty to the Marked being questioned by someone who had betrayed him. By someone who had actually imagined their betrayal of every law, value and custom of demonkind.

Alexus didn't want to talk to her sister. She hated her. She hated that Dyys had been able to see beyond her loyalties, and had done something so selfish. She would become an inspiration to the others. It was unacceptable. Dyys never considered her actions. Didn't consider how badly her ideas may have infected her people. The divisions she may have created, simply by running away.

The ramifications of her actions would last an eternity.

Demonkind had never had a traitor before. Any other traitor that might rise would never be the first. A line had been crossed, and there was no taking it back. Dyys had dared to imagine something no one else before her ever had.

It made Alexis feel physically sick.

She knew that Dyys would feel justified in her actions. That she would feel she had done the right thing, despite breaking their laws. That was the problem. Dyys had created a sense of right that was so abstract that it managed to exist in isolation from their laws. There was no reasoning with someone like that. She knew it, just like all of demonkind knew it.

Humanity had wavering morality and ethics. That was why when they got it wrong, they were punished.

Now a demon might become a prisoner in the Hall of Hells. A demon might need to be purified.

Alexus put a hand to her mouth, steadying her stomach.

She didn't want to think about it anymore, but she couldn't get it out of her head. She just didn't understand it.

Wrodin

He looked at the sunset from his doorway, and he knew instantly he was brooding.

He had wanted the mage to leave. He wanted to get rid of the danger she represented. He wanted to be free of whatever path the other gods had decided to set for him.

The mage hadn't come back.

According to Bel, she'd left for a dwergaz ruin, search for magical sources. Probably crystals or power stones or something. Bel was right to be worried that the mage hadn't returned. Dwergaz ruins were among the worst ruins of the ancient past. A society that so few knew or understood.

By the time Wrodin had opened his eyes in the Void for the first time, that war had become so prevalent it gave rise to a spirit to represent that power, the dwergaz were already gone. They were older than the Fae. This world that humanity inherited had once belonged to so many other races. Humanity was amongst the youngest of all the races. Sure, the orks and goblins were made by mankind, but the elfin, and the Fae, had existed so long before humanity that measuring it was difficult.

He didn't know the full story behind the dwergaz, and that frightened him.

If the demon really had decided to attack one of their ruins... Her soul might already be lost, if she had one.

He didn't know where demonkind had sprung from. Of the races that still existed, they were among the more mysterious. He knew that they referred to all celestials as Marked Ones, after the one that they worshipped. The creature who lead them. He was called the Marked. Yet, he wasn't a celestial. He didn't have the power to create demonkind. On the celestial scale of things, the Marked didn't even register. They didn't have the power to influence reality around them.

Hells, now that Wrodin was mortal and stripped of his power, he was probably the equal of the mysterious creature.

There had been one or two attempts to determine the origin of demonkind, but for the most part the celestials didn't care. The creation of paradise and hell for mortalkind was a blessing. They were happy enough to build their own paradises, and claim souls for them. The gods copied the behaviour, without understanding where it had come from. Not knowing who had first imagined an afterlife for humanity.

He knew that the mage was Fury, one of the more violent kinds of demon, but beyond that... He knew nothing of her people. He didn't know what they were capable of if they were backed into a corner.

That was part of the reason he was so afraid of whoever they had sent to track down the mage... There was a possibility the mage would survive. That they would kill their hunter. If that happened, the response from the Hall of Hells was unprecedented. There was no telling what they might do. No one knew enough about their culture to predict it. They might cut their losses, or consider that the mage had earned her freedom in blood. They might find her honour restored, and her debt paid. Or they might launch a war that could encompass the entire realm. The mage's mere existence might become a religious and existential threat to them. Something to be destroyed, no matter the cost.

There was no way to tell which possibility was closer to the truth, and that made Wrodin feel very small.

Very weak, and very mortal.

He couldn't change these events. He couldn't even stop himself becoming involved in them.

He looked to the frightened mute girl sitting in his home, staring into his fire. Silently praying to any god that could hear.

"Bel."

The woman turned to him in surprise, and Wrodin nodded, "That bracelet on your wrist. The mage gave it to you, for protection. How does it work?"

"I break it, she hears." Bel signed quickly, frowning, "I couldn't break it last time I tried."

Wrodin smiled slowly, "She doesn't hear it. If you break it, now, she will be pulled here. If you truly believe she is in danger... You can save her. Break the bracelet."

Dyys

She stood silently in the centre of a dark room. She'd rather be leaning against a wall, but the last time she'd touched a wall it had suddenly grown a dozen spears in the shape of her person. She was breathing hard, and regretting her decision not to back out, but she was beyond that now. She was injured, and breathing hard. Unless she could find a stronger source of magic, she wouldn't be leaving.

One of the spears earlier had pierced her abdomen. And then there'd been a spider-thing which had torn a ligament in her leg when it tried to rip it off. Then there'd been some ball with a sword, and now she was ripping blood from her shoulder. And then... Dyys sighed. She was in a bad way. The spear through her stomach was the worst, but the rest added up to not being able to fight anymore.

She'd leave the room, she could see lights ahead, except as far as she could tell, every single tile except the centre one she was standing on was trapped. With her leg as busted up as it was, she couldn't just jump to the edge and escape. She was barely limping. The traps weren't the worst. Every tile triggered a call for a spiderling. A bronze and silver tiny thing the size of her palm, which dripped acid everywhere. Unfortunately, they tended to swarm, and they were damn near impossible to destroy. Fire and ice didn't effect them, and even hitting them with a warhammer didn't seem to flatten them. The could only be destroyed by overwhelming the magic crystal inside them.

She was just about out of magic. She didn't have enough to give it away in hopes of a swarm blowing up.

She did have an option. She just didn't want to use it.

Dyys sighed heavily, her shoulders lowering as her hair began to glow red, illuminating the entire room. She immediately heard the skittering of feet as her magical presence was detected, and the ruins sent spiderlings to destroy her. They would just be the first guard. Something else would have noticed her. Noticed the scale of her presence.

Her hair rose into the air, hissing as the strands split and the snakes awoke.

She punched a hand in front of her, breaking the wall of reality with a crack. She winced as her knuckled spit open, and the bones in her hand shattered. Blood dripped from yet another source.

Dyys fell through the gap she'd opened.

She crashed shoulder-first into the ground, outside the room and in the light. Her hair fell, returning to a less luminescent nature, and she rolled over, stabbing upwards with a dagger. The leaping spider twitched for a moment before the crystal inside shattered with a spray of fire and ice.

The demon shook her head, and pulled herself upright, limping further into the hallway.

She paused, smiling slowly as she saw more evidence of the human incursion into this ruin. It wasn't bandits this time, though it did explain their presence. Soldiers. Polished armour. The kind an idiot wears to a funeral on the battlefield. These were men designed to make someone look good.

Dyys kicked one of them, rolling him over and revealing a gaping chasm where a heart should be. Something had ripped it out. The seat of magical power in all mortals. Something had eaten the soul of this idiot.

She sighed and kept walking, but turned slowly as she heard a sound.

A groan, but nearly silent.

Dyys' eyes flashed as she saw the one who was alive. She walked back, crouching in front of him, "Well, you're dead, mortal. Well done."

The man's eyes flickered wildly. She doubted he could hear her. He was dressed like the others. Bright armour, without a scratch. Well, except for the rents where mechanical claws had gone straight through, cutting him open like a chef guts a fish.

She pouted, and then touched the side of his face. She glared at him, her eyes glowing deeper. The fear that rested in the heart of a mortal awoke. A fear she had used to break so many people without saying a single word. She used it to claw him back from the edge of death.

The man coughed, spraying her face with blood.

Dyys smiled, "So, mortal, why are you here?"

The man tried to say something, but instead just coughed some more. She sighed and wiped her face, rubbing the blood between two of her fingers. There wasn't much mana to it, but there never was with humans. All the same, there was some. He was determined. He had a strong will.

"Damn it." Dyys gritted her teeth, and then sucker punched him in the gut.

The man collapsed, vomiting a mix of blood and whatever was left in his stomach.

Dyys stood up, stretching, and then grabbed him by the throat and hoisted him up to her eye level, "I don't have the magic to spare. So you're going to pay me back for this. Got it?"

The man didn't make any sign he had heard her, but it made her feel better all the same.

She twisted her neck to the side and slammed the man's open jaw into her. She felt him fight her, confused. He was too weak to do anything. She brought his jaw to bear, and forced his teeth through her skin. Her blood flood into his mouth. He choked and gagged. She forced him to drink.

The man coughed weakly, still weak and limp.

Dyys tossed him to the ground, with irritation. He'd drained a part of her. About all the magic to spare she had. She wouldn't be able to reveal her true form again, not for a while. All so this stupid bastard who walked into a massive death trap had a chance of living. She gave him about a coin toss. That's the way it was with most humans.

She fell to one knee, flinching as she felt half of the pathetic amount of power she had left vanish.

It had worked.

The mortal's groans turned to screams as her magic coursed through his veins. It wouldn't feel much different than lighting the man on fire, or boiling his blood. He'd be enduring a taste of death.

Dyys sighed and positioned herself against one of the dead, resting. She kept an eye in both directions, and above. She was exhausted, and the sound would probably attract something to come kill them both, but hopefully it was better than her current chances.

"Mortal, whilst you're just screaming there, what's your name?"

"A... Aaron." He gasped out between shrieks of agony.

Dyys didn't know it. Not that she expected to know a single stupid mortal in this region. That wasn't fair. They weren't all stupid. Some of them, like Bel, impressed her. Impressed her both with their ability to act, and their ability to think. Bel deserved more than the hell she was bound for. She deserved to be claimed by a god, but that was reserved for the precious few. The heroes.

Nobody else got paradise.

Just those who were willing and capable of wading through rivers of blood.

The unfairness of it all still made her feel angry. She knew she wasn't supposed to judge. She was supposed to make them understand their sin, and then pass them off to be executed. That just seemed a cruelty to her. Why make them feel regret a moment before you took away any chance of becoming better than they were?

"Well, Aaron, I hope you're ready." She sighed heavily, pushing herself to her feet as the stones beneath her began to vibrate. They were footsteps. The thing that had waited until it was needed. Until someone with her level of magic had turned up. It was a weapon of war. A weapon designed to fight entire armies. Designed to fight heroes.

She glanced back at the mortal climbing shakily to his feet, "Oh for Meria's sake, run! Now!"

She turned back, bracing her fists, "It's a goddamn Wachterin! I can't hold this kregstad off."

She heard him stumbling slowly as the metallic creature moved into view. The skin rippled slowly. A silvery liquid encasing it. Held in place by magical means. Allowing it to adapt to any environment, any attack.

The voice echoed hollowly, speaking a long dead language. "Eindringling. Du wirst zerstört. Bereite deine Seele vor."

"Fuck."

Bel

She played with the bracelet on her wrist. It felt warm to the touch, but it also felt like it belonged. There was something about it that made her not want to break it. She could bring the mage back, bring her home... But the mage was stronger than anyone she knew. They'd managed to crack a calamity stone. A power summoned by the gods had bent to her will.

Did Bel have a right to call her back? When she wasn't in any actual danger?

Wrodin had acted like it was her duty. Kicked her out when she refused to make the choice. That was him all over. He might have lost his divinity, but he was still every bit the asshole god he ever was. He didn't see humans as equals. Just interesting pets.

She sat on the verandah, trying to get some cool air on her face. Just trying to cope with the oppressive heat wave that had rolled in as the sun had disappeared. There was no telling what the weather would be like these days. Freezing and blistering were two sides of the same coin. The crap could strike at any moment.

Nothing much had changed, but she felt like everything had.

The farm wasn't healed. If the mage left, they'd be in no different a situation. Yet... Everything had changed. Everything she knew was different now. She wouldn't be content to live here. Not anymore.

She wanted more.

She wanted the hope the mage brought with her. Existence wasn't enough. Living wasn't enough. She wanted to triumph. She wanted to change the world around her. To make it better. She wanted to see the valley bloom. Wanted to stand at the heart of magic, and heal the world.

She wanted to stand beside the mage, facing the world.

To change it.

She heard footsteps, and glared at the doorway. Jean sighed heavily, "You're worried about her, aren't you?"

Bel didn't do anything. She didn't really feel like talking to him. He was little more than a jerk. A selfish jerk who couldn't begin to see they needed the mage. It wasn't just the farm. Everyone needed that mage. What she represented.

"Go."

She turned to him in surprise, and Jean shrugged, "You've been to the ruins before. You know a thing or two. If she's in danger... And you are afraid for her... Then you have to help her."

She stood up slowly, signing a question.

Jean sighed, "I don't agree. I think we're better off without her. But what I think doesn't matter. What you think matters. If you think you should try and save her, do it. Go."

Alexus

She should have been asleep by now. Resting quietly in her homemade hovel. Knowing that tomorrow she would fulfil her duty.

That should have brought her peace, or excitement.

Instead, all she felt was trepidation.

This was the first time she had ever felt hesitation before doing what was required of her. She couldn't even tell why she was hesitating. She felt no guilt in her actions, only a righteous anger towards Dyys. She wasn't afraid of her sister either. She would succeed, because her path was right and just.

Then why this anxiety?

"That's an easy one to answer, idiot."

Alexus gritted her teeth and turned to glare at the next speaker the gods had sent her way. Yet, when her eyes saw what was there, she didn't dare to insult them. Didn't dare to look them in the eye.

It was a Fae, but it didn't feel like a Fae. The eyes were mostly brown, but flecked with red. The wings were black, and dripped with red and black dust. Destructive and corrupted magics. This was a creature that had seen the worst the worlds had to offer. Worse. Much worse. The soul of this creature was...

Alexus sat up slowly, moving against the wall of the hovel, and braced herself.

The Fae smiled slowly at her, "Yeah. That's an appropriate reaction."

"The gods didn't send you, did they?"

The Fae laughed, "What? Oh. You mean Trei. No. I didn't come because he asked. In fact, he asked me not to. Thought I might kill you. I did have to promise to leave you alive... But, there's plenty of ways to hurt you without inflicting death."

Alexus swallowed nervously. She'd only seen a soul this dark once before. It was the soul of the Marked, the ruler of all the hells. How could this creature have a soul like that?

"I am called Kru." The Fae snapped, "I am a goddess. A new one, like Trei. Well. Not quite like him. You might say I'm the universe's answer to Trei. The balance. I rule the Burned Lands, Eldrasa, and have a little outpost in Ozandia."

Alexus flinched. "What do you want with me?"

"You're a threat." Kru answered, glaring, "Trei might not want to see it, but you are. I don't like threats. Not to me. Usually, I'd eliminate a threat. Unfortunately, Trei is insistent on protecting you unless you break any of his shiny voiden laws. So, I've come to see whether or not I'll banish you to the Void for eternity."

Alexus clenched her fists, "I will do my duty."

"What if I don't want you to?" Kru said lifting a handful of red dust, "This woman. Dyys. She's corruptible. I wouldn't mind making her mine. She'd make a decent lich, or general in my army."

Alexus glared, "I will kill her, or return her to the hells. There are no other options."

Kru rolled her eyes, "You can't do that if I banish you beyond the Void."

“I will always try and return.” She snapped, “I am the Unceasing. I will not stop.”

Kru shrugged, “Sure. But I’m a god. I don’t end, either. Every time you come back, I’ll send you away. Until Trei lets me kill you. Because he will. Or I’ll get so sick of everything, I’ll do it anyway. Trei won’t go to war over one tiny infraction. And your death would be tiny indeed.”

Alexus sighed heavily, “I know. You will kill me. But I will never stop trying to do my duty.”

Kru smiled slowly, “Well. I’ve changed my mind. You are far more interesting than Dyys. Your heart... That’d be fun to corrupt.”

Alexus swallowed nervously.

Kru shrugged, and stood up, “Another time. Now. Get some sleep. You have someone to kill in the morning.”

The Fae blew a puff of dust into her face. Alexis blinked, rubbing her eyes, and then felt herself falling.

Wrodin

He slept. He was in the Void. Drifting amongst the endless edges of nowhere and nothing. Here, he was one with the lifestream, the source of magic, gods, and reality itself. Here all threads began, and ended.

This was only a dream. This wasn't his world anymore. He'd lost it, when he made the mistake of trying to destroy Sarin. The other gods had been content with their places in the world. Even content to fade away as their powers were stripped by their heirs.

Some, like Kao, even went out of their way to try and train their heirs. To show them how to take their power away.

He'd resist it. He went to war to become war itself, again. He was the spirit of war, in the hearts and minds of all peoples.

Not anymore.

He'd lost that when he'd stood against Sarin, and found Kao in his way. He'd been forced to resort to deceit. Trying to frame Sarin. That was beyond a mistake.

The truth of it was that he'd never had a chance to win. He lost the moment Kao thought he might get in the way.

No one stood a chance at the goddess of chaos.

The first of the celestials.

Then, he'd made the unforgivable mistake of trying to oppose the heir of Kao. He hadn't realised how merciful the goddess had been until her heir had inherited her power.

Kru was not merciful. She didn't need to be. She'd inherited the power of the first of the gods. It was now her right to rule them. Right and wrong were defined by her whims. That was how the 'verse worked.

Or should have.

He looked at the figure he could see the Void. The figure he always saw when he dreamed of the Void. The figure who haunted his every waking moment. Who became his nightmares every night.

His existence was what had inspired Wrodin into stupidity.

He had no balance, not amongst the gods. It had taken the Council of Gods to oppose Kao, to keep her in line. She agreed mostly because she didn't care enough to intervene. Kao just wanted to entertain herself.

The first of the new pantheon was different. The Council of Gods couldn't oppose him, even united. Hells, the Council could have united with Kao, and they still couldn't have stopped him.

His power was beyond any of the gods that had ever existed. The only thing that limited him was his own beliefs, and his own code of ethics. His own desire to remain human. To stay with his bride.

If Trei didn't love Summer as intensely as he did, then the 'verse would fall into chaos.

If anybody was stupid enough to try and kill Summer, it could still fall into chaos. Any agreements, limitations or rules that Trei had agreed to would evaporate.

And now... Now there was someone new. Someone the gods wanted to protect.

Dyys might not be a god. She might be a nobody, like Shannon. The priestess. A human mortal who had managed to defeat a god. Simply because neither her, nor her will, could ever be bent.

Either way, Wrodin didn't want anything to do with it. He'd made enough mistakes to last this lifetime.

He just wanted to live out the rest of his mortal days in peace, and then die.

"You are terribly boring."

Wrodin looked at the newcomer, the spirit floating alongside him and hoped he was still dreaming. They had no form, no shape. They had no real presence, except that they decided to have presence.

He sighed heavily, "Boring is underrated. I just want to be able to go my way."

The goddess laughed slowly, "Oh, Wrodin. That's not why I made you, and isn't why I condemned you to mortality. I put you on this path. That you think you have a chance not to follow it is... Hilarious."

He rolled his eyes, "You're not even a goddess anymore, Kao. You live as a mortal, with your bride. That you think you can control me, is hilarious."

She burst out laughing. He could tell she was crying, she was laughing so hard.

An intangible hand touched his shoulder, and she gasped out in his ear, "When did I do that?"

Understanding spun in his mind. The goddess was timeless. She might one day become mortal. She had already, but that didn't mean that the one he was speaking to had done it yet.

She existed outside of most of reality.

Kao was still involved in events.

Dyys

“Time... To... Pay me... Back... Mortal.” She gasped, falling to her knees as the blood fell from just every single surface of her body.

The man turned slowly, holding his sword timidly in a shaky grip. “I... I can’t fight that thing.”

“Kal an sina dal manda sin da ra fas -” Dyys cut herself off, trying to get her angry breathing under control. “Of course you can’t, idiot. I want my magic back. You came here for magic, right? So you have some. I need it.”

The man fumbled and tossed a tiny quartz crystal from inside his breastplate. “This is all I have. We were getting it here.”

Dyys groaned, standing up. She shoved him out of the doorway, and glared as a wall of darts shot towards her. The crystal didn’t even have enough magic to heal her. It was pathetic.

The humans really had been completely unprepared for the ruins.

She diverted the darts, and looked at the liquid creature that had fired them. It formed up slowly, taking her own shape.

Dyys grinned. So the Wachterin had decided she was a worthy threat. It believed the most dangerous form in its memories was her.

Unfortunately, it might well be correct.

She only had once chance at this. The crystal would shatter the moment she drew this much power. Usually it wouldn’t be a problem. Half-dead, that was another matter.

The creature ran towards her.

The crystal cracked in her hand.

There was a flash as a number of things all happened at once.

The Wachterin unleashed a tornado of wind and fire, drawing the contents of the room towards it. The mortal was instantly swept off his feet, losing his sword in the process.

Behind it, a sigil appeared on the ground. At the moment it appeared, Dyys exploded with a scream, becoming pulverised blood and bone.

The surface of the Wachterin solidified as the magic diverted from maintain its shape, to maintaining the attack.

As the mortal entered the blaze, screaming as the metal tortured and twisted around his soft flesh, there was another spray of blood from behind the Wachterin.

Dyys was on her knees, drenched head to toe. She dropped the remnants of the quartz from her hand, and took a single step. Her fist slammed through the solid back of the guardian. As she did the gout of flames stopped, and the metal swarmed over her skin, attempting to encase her.

She bared her fangs and wrenched her arm free. A fist-sized crystal lay in her hands. She crushed it. The Wachterin vanished, silver dropping to the ground as a liquid. Running off her, and across the edges of the floor and under the walls. Running into every nook and cranny.

Dyys fell forwards, coughing blood and grabbing her stomach where she had been impaled.

The mortal stood up slowly, “Holy shit. Did you kill it?”

“Yes.” Dyys winced, struggling to breathe, “Might... Have killed myself... Too.”

He winced, “Couldn’t you have kept the crystal?”

She shook her head. It was too much effort to speak. To much effort to explain that the droplets of silver weren’t the Wachterin. The guardian was just a core of magic that could draw physical surfaces like the silvery metal to itself. The only way to stop it, was to break the core. That’s how most of the skilled adventurers died. They tried to keep the core. They knew it was powerful, and thought it could be their prize. The guardian would kill them the moment they dropped their guard.

The mortal walked over, pulling her over his shoulder and helping her stand, “So what do we do now?”

“Magic.” She gasped weakly, “Need.”

He looked around in a daze, “I have no idea where we are. The channelling room is on this floor, but I have no idea which direction to go.”

“Left.” Dyys whispered, hoping that they weren’t about to run into any more automated defences. Hopefully most of those had been put to bed when the Wachterin had been activated.

Bel

Her feet moved in familiar patterns as she crossed the tiled floors. Patterns learned from mistakes made in a troubled youth. Learned and reinforced by the injuries they took. The friends they lost. She'd been such a stupid kid back then. Dreaming of being an adventurer. Following Izak and his dream of one day becoming a paladin. They'd both grown up. Outgrown dreams of conquering dungeons.

Now he was gone. There was no one to catch her if she made a mistake.

She paused for a breather on a safe tile, looking at the corpses in the entryway to the ruins. It was obvious they hadn't been as lucky, but it wasn't obvious to her who they were. They were soldiers of some kind. Balavidians. However, she didn't recognise the crest on the uniform. It wasn't one she'd seen before. They hadn't been through here before.

Maybe she should be grateful that the bandit problem was probably handled. Instead, she found herself wondering if the soldiers had captured the mage. Wondering if they had killed her. She wasn't human, and she wasn't exactly hiding it either. To the army, the mage was probably nothing more than a weapon. A useful tool to be exploited until it breaks from the strain.

No human would be able to stay standing if the army broke her.

Dyys.

The bracelet around her wrist burned, and Bel held it up in surprise. She moved her wrist, and the pain increased. She moved it in another direction and it decreased. She grinned slowly as she realised what it meant.

The farmhand drew her sword quietly, and moved into a section of the ruin she'd been too scared to explore as a child.

She wasn't a child anymore.

Alexus

She looked around at the small village as she moved down the winding mountain path. The paths were stone here. Stone laid long before humanity had been an idea in the mind of the god that had forged them into being. They were too well formed, and too well worn. They were dwergaz. An ancient people long since lost to a calamity of their own. Maybe humanity would be joining them as a lost race before long.

The village was entirely unimpressive. A half dozen farmhouses. A single building for the community, which seemed to double as a place of residence. She moved towards it, smiling at the man sitting on the porch. He nodded slowly, "Howdy, stranger. What brings you our way?"

Alexus flashed her teeth at him and flicked her hair, "I'm looking for my sister."

She hated herself for using the language. Hated herself for the flirting. It made her want to vomit. Yet, she didn't really know how to talk to someone without threatening to tear out their throat. This was all Trei's doing. Forcing her to follow his stupid rules. Rules without merit. You killed the weak and useless. You killed any who might be a threat to you. That was the way of the world. Not this... Kindness.

"Your sister have a name, love?" The man asked cautiously.

She didn't care what he had to say. His aura had already screamed recognition. She looked around again, sniffing the air, "I doubt she'll be using her name. There's a bounty on her head. I intend to collect."

The man stood up slowly, "Hey, now. We don't no trouble in our town. Ain't she your sister?"

Alexus glared back at him, "Don't get involved in this, mortal. I showed you my teeth. Neither she, nor I, are human. I cannot guarantee your safety if you try and get in my way. If anyone tries to protect my sister... She doesn't have a consideration for mortal life. She's not just a mage, human."

The man swallowed nervously, a hand touching a throwing knife tucked beneath his jacket, "And what are you then, if not human?"

"I'm a demon." She stated flatly, and knocked away the blade as the man reacted. "A Fury, to be precise."

The man backed up slowly, "Oh, gods."

"Already got their permission." Alexis replied, "Now... My sister went that way. What is in that direction?"

The man looked where she was pointing and frowned, "Only thing within a day's travel in that direction would be the old dwergaz ruin. A week or two more, and you might hit Gesalt."

The ruin. That had to be where she went. The magic of this realm was pathetic. It took far too long to regenerate it. The magical matrices of the world seemed damaged, causing the energy to fade long before it re-entered the world. Dyys had spent a considerable amount of time here already. She would be weakened. She would seek out anything she could to reinforce her power, her authority.

Alexus began to move off towards the small path that made do for a road, when she heard the human behind her shout, "She's been good to us. What did she do that was so bad? For a demon?"

She growled angrily and turned, "She murdered two of our kind for doing their duty. She broke every law we had by running away. She has committed high treason. We have never had to sentence

a demon before. Not ever. Not even for stealing a loaf of bread. It doesn't happen. Until Dyys. And for her first crime, she decides to kill one of us. Just a guard. Nothing more."

The man went pale and he nodded, tipping his hat. It was clearly intended to apologise, and to move her on. She could feel herself twitching. The man had hit a nerve. All the anger she'd been boiling for the last few days was about to cascade over. She hated her sister. Hated her with every fibre of her being. This wasn't just about duty anymore, even though it should be. And she hated Dyys for making her feel that way, as well.

Alexus forced herself to slowly turn around. It was difficult.

She wanted to kill the man. She knew it wouldn't satisfy her. Humans were too fragile for that. All the same, she wanted to kill him. The only thing forcing her will to stay strong was the thought of Trei intervening. Even his elf, a mere eternal like herself, had managed to soundly defeat her.

She had no desire to add to the list of failures in her life.

She began moving in the direction of the ruins.

Wrodin

He stared at the woman leaving the town, and then swore loudly and raised a hand.

A spear appeared in it, as a cloak of hides settled on his shoulders. His rags rippled and turned to chainmail. His eyes went from sad and empty, to furious. He didn't have a choice. Not if it was her that had been sent. There was no way to avoid this battle. He was going to be part of events, after all.

If only to save every stinking human in Balavid.

If he ignored that she was the one they sent, then through his inaction the entire nation would be slaughtered. There was every chance the entire continent might join them in death. There was no mortal who could stand in the way of that woman. No mortal who would be able to survive if the mage even tried to fight back.

They'd sent Alexis the Unceasing. The bounty hunter of Hell. A woman who was walking, breathing, weapon of mass destruction. A woman who he'd seen tear the arms off an ork and beat it half to death with it's own fists, simply to entertain herself during the kill. A woman he'd seen rammed through by two dozen stakes, and it hadn't even slowed her down. She'd executed the king who'd dared to bind a demon, and walked away. Tossing the stakes away as if they were nothing more than toothpicks. As if penetrative trauma to the gut and chest weren't lethal.

She was a Fury. A demon born of violence. There was no reasoning with them. The only Fury to have ever deviated from the rule of law, the precise interpretation of the Marked, was the one this demon was hunting down. Demigods had fallen by the hands of Alexis. Wrodin knew it well. Half of them had been his own. Warriors who weren't satisfied with the strength he gave them, who bargained with hell for more, and then tried to renege on their deals with the Marked.

So he had Marked them for death, and Alexis had collected.

None of them had ever stood a chance.

If she was going to the dwergaz ruin, where Dyys was, and where Bel was, then there would be no survivors of that fight. He owed it to Bel to save her, and he owed it to the town to try and contain the other two inside. There was a chance that the collateral damage could be contained under that one mountain. A small one, but a chance all the same.

He had to try.

Dyys

The human handed her a crystal, but she pushed him aside tiredly and walked over to the bench. There was a machine here, that channelled magical energy into a crystal, if it was the right kind and weight. A flat panel, beneath a spike. It looked so simple, so innocuous.

She put her hand directly onto the panel.

She heard the mortal cry out, but ignored him as the magic hit her. She could feel her hand burning, the skin blistering and the muscles popping, but she did not care at this point.

She blinked slowly, breathing deeply as she felt her other injuries fading. It felt like she was waking up from a deep and completely unrestful sleep. And that she was being hit by lightning as a wake up call. It sucked. So badly.

She pulled her hand away, shaking it as she healed it, and turned slowly, "Now then, mortal. Why did you invade a dwergaz ruin?"

The man glared at her, "And what are you?"

"A demon." Dyys rolled her eyes, "A Fury, from the Hall of Hells. My name is Dyys."

The man shivered slowly, "You really are a demon. I didn't believe it."

"No human could kill a Wachterin. Well, maybe one or two. Chance of you meeting them is remote." Dyys interjected, and glared, "Tell me. Now. Why are you here? If I don't like the answer, I will kill you."

The man sighed heavily, looking at her carefully, "I don't doubt it. Nor do I doubt that you could do it. I... We were looking for two things. Crystals for magic, and a book. A very particular book. We don't even know if it's here. This was our fourth dwergaz ruin we searched... I never expected to find a living Wachterin."

Dyys glared at him, "Title."

"Über Auferstehung, Verjungung, und Unsterblichkeit." The man said slowly, pronouncing each word slowly.

Dyys gritted her teeth, "Kregstad. That book still exists? There's a horrifying thought."

The man shrugged, "Have you noticed that this world is doomed, demon? We've lost our food supplies. Lost our water. The weather is so shite we might not even be able to grow anything if the soil wasn't dead."

"I noticed." Dyys replied slowly, "I've been helping. I'm healing a farm near here. That's what I do."

He rolled his eyes, "A demon healer. Who would have thought it."

"We all do what we can to make up for our sins." She snapped, "I can see your soul, mortal. Do you want to know how deep you will be in the Hall?"

The man swallowed nervously, "I'm... Going to hell?"

"Of course you are!" She yelled, "Every mortal who isn't a chosen instrument of the gods ends up in hell. Life isn't fair, it's full of utter bullshit. Van ad en sa frk'na! You will get tortured. And the moment you regret and understand your sins, they'll destroy your soul. Your death isn't that much different than the elfin. They live until someone kills them, and then they're gone. No more soul."

He looked at her, at the tears in her eyes that she refused to shed, and smiled softly, “You ran away. Didn’t you?”

“Yes.” Dyys sighed, “And I will keep running. But first, I have a farm to heal. So I’m going to grab some spells from the library. You are not going to go looking for that book. Interrogate me all you like. That book is... Humanity isn’t ready for it.”

She heard a knock at the door.

Dyys looked up in shock, “Bel.”

The farmhand smiled, walking in. She sheathed her sword, and dashed off a flurry of signs.

Dyys shrugged, “No idea. Sorry. But... I guess kinda worried you. I’m sorry for that.”

The farmhand nodded slowly, breathing a little easier.

Dyys waved a hand, “This is Bel, and this is... Someone.”

“Prince Vanadreer.” The man said bowing, “A pleasure to meet you.”

Bel went white and Dyys yawned, “Oh yay. A freaking prince. That explains the attitude. Anyways, Bel, I was about to head to the library. Want to come?”

Bel gestured something towards the prince, and Dyys looked over at him boredly. “Oh. He’s just an idiot who waltzed in here to find a book about necromancy. Probably one of the most dangerous books ever written.”

Dyys picked up a fist-sized chunk of crystal and placed it in the charging platform for a moment. “There. I’m done. Library?”

The prince sighed, “I feel I must warn you, Miss Bel, this woman is a demon.”

Bel shrugged. No other expression. No shock. No judgement. Dyys felt herself relax a little. That was one conversation she had not been looking forward to. One she wasn’t even sure her poor signing skills would allow her to even have in the first place.

Dyys tossed a charged piece of crystal in her hand, smiling, “Come on, Bel. Let me show you what I can do when I’m not starving.”

She wasn’t quite sure why she’d said that.

Getting to the library was relatively uneventful. There were a few spiderlings, but with her being at full strength all she needed to do was rip the magic out of them before they could approach. The tile hopscotch was less fun, but those traps became less and less common as you entered further into the ruins.

The library was where the dwergaz had lived, and so there were less difficult to find protections.

Dyys opened the door slowly, smiling as she walked in. “Doubt you’ve ever seen this many books in one place before, Bel. Try not to touch. Some of them... Well most of them have magic. Some might have gone bad.”

The farmhand gazed in awe as they entered, and Dyys grinned. “Take a look down. You won’t be able to see the bottom.”

The prince looked around and sighed, “And how are we supposed to find anything?”

Dyys glared at him, “You are not getting your hands on that book. It won’t help anything. At all.”

He glared back at her, “I’m beginning to tire of this. You saved me, I’m grateful. I’m hoping you’ll help me get out again. But you can’t walk around telling me what to do. It doesn’t work like that here.”

Bel spun, flashing a sign quickly. Dyys sighed, “She just warned you prince. Or rather, asked me not to kill you. I’m. . . Trying. I know humans see death as a big deal. But killing someone is about as common as waving to them, where I’m from. It is a lot of instinct and habit to overcome. So please. Don’t antagonise me. I told you already, I’ll answer your questions. Use me, not the book.”

The prince frowned, “Can you really heal the land? That’s what we wanted it for.”

“Yes.” Dyys breathed a sigh of relief, “It’s a creation spell. I’ve healed a dozen farms already. The scale of the spell has to reflect the scale of destruction done by the calamity, so the closer to the origin, the harder it gets. But the spell is fairly simple, really. It just involves a lot of mana. Teaching another mortal it. . . As long as they’re aware they might die, and you’re aware it might destroy an entire region if the spell rebounds, I would be willing.”

Bel tapped her shoulder, and Dyys smiled at her glare. “Spells don’t rebound for me, Bel. I never put your farm at risk.”

The woman cocked her head in surprise. Dyys shrugged, “Spells rebound when they reject the nature of the caster. When the will of nature is stronger than that of a caster. Like the body fighting an infection. As a demon, my will is stronger than the nature of your world. If that wasn’t the case, I’d have died long ago. I did have a spell rebound once, a very long time ago. In the middle of a duel, with a demon who was by far my superior. It hasn’t happened since.”

The prince shrugged, “This creation spell. How can you guarantee it will always work? You said it gets harder. Closer to the origin of the calamity.”

Dyys nodded, “Simple. It’s a smaller-scale version of the spell used to create your world. The same spell that was used to recreate all the worlds, after the tear.”

Bel made a hesitant sign and Dyys winced. “Um. . . Princeling, can you piss off for a bit?”

The man threw his hands up and walked off into the stacks.

Dyys pull up a metallic stool, and then sat on another. “I guess I owe you a few explanations.”

Bel sat down slowly, and touch her head, mouth and put her hands together. Dyys sighed, “Yeah. I could read your thoughts. Or make it so you could think into my head. Both of those seem. . . Intrusive. Rude. I’d rather try and learn. So, please. Try and ask. Whatever you want to know. Nothing held back.”

The first question wasn’t one she’d considered. “Why?”

Dyys sighed, and scratched her head. “I don’t know. I don’t like the idea of you not knowing. I haven’t exactly tried to hide anything. But I didn’t warn you what I am. What it might mean. I taught you magic, but I gave you warnings for that. I didn’t give you warnings about talking to me. I doubt that many mortals would feel comfortable having a demon for a friend. I owed you that much.”

“I already knew.” Bel signed, “I don’t care.”

Dyys smiled, “I hoped. But, here it goes anyway. My name is Dyys. I’m a Fury. There aren’t many of us. About a dozen. We’re the favoured children of the Marked, the ruler of the Hall of Hells. Furies. . . We have red hair, red eyes. Though, I shouldn’t say hair. It isn’t. I’m. . . Suppressing it.

How I actually look. To look more human. To try and fit in.”

Bel smiled at her, and signed something. She didn’t get all of it. “Do you. . . Want to see?”

The woman nodded.

Dyys winced, “I. . . I can’t. Mortals tend to go insane when they see me. I’ve shown it off a few times. Like when you were unconscious by the rock, but I have to be careful. No mortal can look in my eyes and be okay, not if I show who I am. That’s part of being a Fury.”

Bel smiled sadly at her, and brushed her cheek. Dyys smiled, taking her hand, “Yeah. It sucks. I don’t mean to live a lie. I have to.”

The brunette signed hesitantly.

Dyys repeated one of the signs, “This is for hell?”

Bel nodded.

Dyys sighed, “To describe my home. . . That’s a hard one. I don’t think we’d get very far. Too many questions. But I can show you. Show you a memory of mine.”

Bel cocked her head and Dyys held out a hand, “It won’t be pleasant. But if you hold my hand, you’ll see what I saw.”

Bel

As she took the mage's hand the world seemed to crack. A spiderweb of cracks flying out at right angles, before each section of the world folded in. Folded away from sight.

She was nowhere. The only reassurance she had was the feeling of the mage's warm hand in hers.

There was a pause of silence, and then she began to hear something. It was distant, but getting closer. She couldn't place it, which was surprising to her. It was like running water, but wasn't. It was different than sand or rock falling.

The heat hit her, and she fell to her feet, sweat pouring off her instantly. She almost felt like she was choking. She blinked, noticing the ground in front of her. Blood was dripping on the ground, a knife lodged in her stomach.

"Aw, come off it, Dyys! Get up. I didn't hit you that hard."

Bel stood up slowly, though she hadn't moved to. That's right. This was a memory. She could effect it, she was along for the ride. Seeing things as Dyys had seen them.

What she could see, was a ground made of rough bedrock. Beside it, black smoke drifted lazily upwards. Directly in front of her was a woman. She had red-hair, that was glowing, but out of focus.

She heard Dyys' voice, "What do you want, Alexis? Did you have to stab me?"

"I heard you weren't busy. that you cracked your latest." Alexis shrugged, "I wanted to hang out."

Bel turned away, "Screw off, Alexis. I am not in the mood."

A hand rested on her shoulder, "Hey. Dyys. Why the heck are you being so rude?"

Bel's shoulders dropped, and Dyys whispered, "Because they didn't deserve it."

The world shattered, and Bel gasped, looking at the mage holding her hand. They were looking away, tears running down her cheeks.

Bel smiled. The mage had wanted to show her more than that. The memory had been too much. She was okay with that. She'd seen the heat, the rough world, and that get stabbed in the gut was nothing more than a surprise greeting.

Dyys sighed, "Sorry. I miss her."

Bel blinked. She missed the psycho who stabbed her in the gut. That was a bit shocking, but if it really was part of the normal world... It made sense that the mage missed people.

To leave hell, she must have left people behind.

Leave family. She was one of only a handful of Furies. This world surrounded by humans, must feel so strange to her. So quiet, and empty of the people she called her own. People who reacted differently to the world around her. Bel had felt horror when the bandits had died. She'd felt afraid of the mage. Afraid because the mage had done the thing she had been raised to do. Confusion and frustration must have been what the mage felt when she saw that.

She was from another world. A world where death simply didn't matter.

It wasn't one Bel thought she could ever fully comprehend.

Dyys breathed deeply, wiping her face. "That was Alexis. My sister. She's also the one they would have sent to kill me, or trap me."

Bel glared, clenching her fists.

Dyys shrugged, “If you don’t get in the way, they won’t stop you. I’m the only one in danger. I knew this was coming, Bel. I left my home. I broke their laws. Their laws... They’re as important as the words of the gods. They may as well be the words of the gods to demonkind. I only ever had a short time. Time to enjoy my freedom. I’ve loved every moment of it.”

Bel signed in confusion, “What do you mean every moment?”

Dyys waved a hand towards the library entrance, “She’s here. Alexis.”

The door opened slowly, and the red-haired woman from the vision walked in, “You can say your goodbyes.”

Dyys smiled at Bel, and squeezed her hand, before standing, “You know I won’t come willingly, right?”

Alexus shrugged, “You never made anything easy. You also know I will never stop.”

The two demons stood watching each other, and then Dyys growled back at her, “Time to run, Bel. You don’t want to get caught up in this.”

Alexus

She smiled, looking at the traitor. The woman she hated down to her core. Dyys hadn't even tried to run. The demon wasn't even at half her strength. She was starved for magic. She could see it in Dyys' aura. She was weaker now than she had ever been in hell. Which didn't bode well for her. Alexis was her equal in not a few forms of combat.

"Come on." Alexis sighed, "Time to go. The Marked is waiting."

"No."

Alexis clenched her fists, "I would rather bring you back alive."

Dyys shrugged.

Alexis snapped forward, the ground beneath her cracking instantly. Her fist slammed towards her sister's face. Dyys caught the blow easily, catching the fist in an open hand and twisting her wrist. She didn't catch the knife in Alexis' other hand as it slammed into her stomach, and up underneath the ribcage.

Dyys made a strange noise as she tried to gasp, but no air moved in or out. Alexis head-butted her, snapping her into the ground, and off the blade. She stood either side of the fallen demon, pinning her arms as she crouched. She gently placed the blade against her sister's throat, "One more chance. In light of friendship."

Dyys grinned up at her, "That would be breaking the rules, Alexis. Do your duty."

Alexis felt her cheek twinge, and she slashed the knife across her throat with a spray of blood.

Dyys gurgled. Bubbles forming in the blood forming at her throat. Her pinned hands opened and closed frantically as she began to drown. Alexis glared at her, "You did this. You abandoned our faith. You insulted our god. You chose to give up everything of what it means to be a demon. So now, you die like a mortal. Pathetic, and weak. I will watch the light go out from your eyes, and drag your soul back to the Hall of Hells. I will place you in the Tenth Circle, and the Marked will pass judgement on you."

Dyys managed a smile for a moment.

Alexis stared at her in confusion, "What exactly could be pleasing in this? You forced me to be the first to kill a traitor. I don't want my name attached to your history. I don't want to be any part of the tale of the first traitor. You were a Fury. Where was the anger when you needed it? Why did you betray us?"

A thought bubbled into her head, "You have all the answers you need, already. I didn't make my choice overnight... This isn't an interrogation, Alexis. You told me to say goodbye to everyone. This is my goodbye to you."

Alexis looked at her in confusion, and then glared over at the pinned hands. They weren't scrabbling. They were painting. Sigils beneath both hands.

Her eyes widened and she jumped upwards, trying to escape.

The magic snapped into place.

Alexis screamed in agony as the banishment spell locked around her.

Wrodin

He was knocked sideways into a golden pillar as something exploded into existence in front of him. He barely had a chance to notice the hellfire before the pillar wrapped around him with tongues of raw magic. His mortal frame instantly began to deteriorate. Flakes of skin floated into the air as ash, his chainmail began to glow as the magic tried to change its form.

He pulled himself away from the pillar, wincing as it felt like half his face stayed in place.

The creature in front of him staggered upright, hair beginning to glow. She clenched her fists and he spoke, "Alexus the Unceasing."

The demon spun, her eyes glaring at him, burning inside with far more power than he'd seen her employ in the past. The creature looked him up and down and then spat on the ground. "The traitorous god. Leave, mortal."

"I won't allow you to bring harm to this world." He stated with more confidence than he felt. Truth be told, he probably couldn't make good on that. She was right. He was just a mortal now. He had access to magic, and knowledge of forbidden and long forgotten spells. He could probably defeat a demon, maybe even multiple at once. He was not, however, an equal to a Fury. A demigod among demonkind, or something like it.

Alexus was one of the more powerful ones. The only one stronger was Dyys.

She rolled her eyes, "You can barely stand upright. Mortal, I have made promises. I cannot keep my vows if you get in my way. Do not make me become as much a traitor as the one I hunt. Leave."

Wrodin glared at her, "I cannot."

Alexus clenched her fists and punched a wall, buckling the metal, "Trei! You bastard! I know you're watching! Get rid of this thing! This wasn't part of our deal!"

Wrodin spat on the ground, "Trei."

Alexus turned back, and Wrodin shook his head, "Gods might be unpredictable, Alexus. Trei is worse. Don't expect him to turn up, just because it's convenient. Doesn't even matter if you're one of his chosen ones. He might abandon you."

She glared at him, "Kregstad. Leave, mortal. I've just been banished and sealed to this damn ruin. I am not in the mood. It is difficult not to kill you. Please, get out."

Wrodin smiled sadly, knowing what would happen.

He cast the barrier.

The demon snapped passed the cube before it could close, her hand ripping through his throat like it wasn't even there. He fell to the ground, grabbing weakly. He felt faint. He couldn't breathe. He was drowning. He couldn't...

Dyys

She walked quietly atop one of the bookcases, and paused, smiling, “Bel.”

The woman looked up in shock, eyes wide. She was frightened. She had a right to be. Dyys smiled and jumped down, “I did kind of mean for you to leave. I’ve sealed Alexis. She can’t leave the ruin. So you have to.”

Bel nodded and then signed towards her.

Dyys shook her head, “No. The seal won’t hold Alexis forever. I have to face the consequences for my actions. That doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten my obligation to you and the farm, though.”

She fished a couple sheets of blood-stained paper from a pocket and pressed them into her hands, “Any half-decent mage can finish the spell with these. I’ve also left some gold at the farmhouse. In the well.”

Bel shook her head, glaring.

Dyys sighed heavily, “I’m sorry, I thought I had more time. But Alexis is here, and I can’t protect you from her. I can’t. I can’t match her if I have to be concerned that someone nearby might die. You need to leave. That’s the only way I can save you, from her.”

Bel crossed her arms, fighting tears.

Dyys ground her fangs together, “Bel. Please. Don’t do this. I cannot have your death on my conscience.”

Bel blinked in surprise, and she recognised the sign. “Death?”

Dyys smiled weakly, “I’m changing. I left, because what I was doing... Was wrong. Now please. Run for your life.”

The woman put a hand on her sword and Dyys felt the urge to hit something. It was endearing. Really. Yet, that didn’t change the fact that Bel was just a child with a toy. She didn’t have anything at all that would remotely concern Alexis. Even if Bel could somehow master a high-level destruction spell immediately, human reaction times were just too slow. It took them hundreds of milliseconds to react.

It took Alexis less time than that to kill everyone in a crowded room.

Bel was simply outclassed. She couldn’t get into the same class. Not as she was. There was an option, but isn’t one that Dyys wanted to offer. It could keep Bel alive, if she didn’t attack. If she did... Then no power in the ’verse would save her from Alexis.

Dyys sighed heavily, “You are stubborn. If you want to stay, fine. You’ll have to do something, but you’ll live. But if you attack Alexis, I can’t save you. You will die. Instantly. No chance for regrets.”

Bel gave a curt nod, and Dyys held up her wrist and bit it. The fangs shredded the flesh easily, and she winced as the sharp pain. She held out her wrist. “Swallow.”

Bel

She felt physically sick at the solution the mage was offering her. Drinking blood would make her feel queasy at the best of times. Drinking the blood of a demon, in order to gain some sort of power from it, seemed like nothing short of heresy.

The way Dyys was looking right now, coat with blood from her neck down the centre of her chest, wasn't helping either.

Her choices were to run away, or to damn her soul.

Either way, she couldn't fight. She knew she wasn't much of a fighter. All the same, she wanted to. She wanted to be able to fight for her home. To fight for everyone she cared about. It didn't matter that the mage was practically a stranger. Maybe the strangest person she'd ever met. They were her guest.

Bel winced and grabbed the dripping wrist.

The moment the coppery liquid touched her tongue everything changed. Fire shot through her veins. Her brain screamed inside her skull, feeling like someone had driven a stake into it. Her vision disappeared, and she couldn't feel the ground where she was standing anymore.

She was still standing, even if she couldn't feel it. As if all sensation except for pain had disappeared. She couldn't see. She was in complete darkness.

She blinked in surprise.

Not complete darkness. Absence. She could see something, a door in front of her. It was distant. It was also the only thing she could see. No light sources. No ground. Just a small timber object, with a brass handle.

She stepped forward towards it cautiously, feeling like her foot would fall and she'd tumble off into nowhere. She didn't.

Bel glared at the doorway and walked towards it.

She froze.

Someone had appeared, leaning lazily against the door. They looked up at her, glaring, "What do you think you can do in this fight, mortal? You're dead. All this will do is make sure you don't die in the first moment."

Bel signed into the air, "It gives me a chance. That's enough."

The figure leaned forward, revealing black wings floating behind, "A chance. Now there's something curious. You want to be able to fight, don't you?"

Bel didn't say anything.

The figure grinned, revealing a mouthful of fangs, "Oh yes. You are exactly what I've been looking for. A warrior who won't back down. Someone who thinks, and then they act. They always act. They aren't compelled to follow their fear, despite feeling it. Yes. I like you."

"Who are you?"

The figure laughed, "Name's Kru, of the Kruei. Goddess of the Burning Lands. Conqueror of Eldrasa. Some of the orks have taken to calling me the Corrupted One. Not sure I like that title, but looks like it'll be sticking. Call me whatever you want."

"Move. Please." Bel signed, taking another step forward.

The figure glanced behind her at the door, “That? Sure. You can have the strength of a demon if you want. I won’t stop you. I like you. That means I want to help. I could give you something else. An edge. A chance to fight, not just to watch.”

Bel put a hand on her hip, looking pointedly.

The goddess laughed and stepped aside, “I’ll be watching you, Belladonna. Try not to disappoint me.”

The winged creature turned in place, dissolving into pieces of darkness.

Bel shook her head, shivering.

Twice. That was twice now that gods had expressed interest in her. Ancient and dangerous creatures whose whims never seemed to favour humanity. Creatures that had recently doomed her world, and killed almost everyone she had ever known.

She didn’t like the gods. Didn’t like their meddling. They had done enough harm in the last two years. Whatever god had their eyes on her, she didn’t want their help.

She put a hand on the doorway.

She would take help from a demon. A demon who had earned her trust.

She stepped through the door.

Heat washed over her, burning her. Drowning her in her own skin. She could feel liquid running over her, but it wasn’t sweat. It was sticky and hot. She was sweating blood. She fell to her knees, feeling the exhaustion hitting her like a wall. She was too tired to keep her eyes open. Too tired to do much more than twitch her fingers. She felt her elbows give way and she face-planted into the tiled floor.

She... Had... To save her. Had to stand by her.

Dyys needed her.

She didn’t know it, but she needed her all the same.

Bel slammed a hand onto the ground, cracking the tile, and pushed herself slowly upright. She glared angrily towards the doorway.

Dyys looked sideways at her, beaming.

Alexus

She burst into the library again, shaking off one of the spiders she had picked up on her way back down and through this imitation of a hell dimension. She waved a hand, destroying the sigil holding her in this place, and glared at the waiting demon.

Her hair burst into light, the snakes hissing as they floated in the air. Alexis didn't say anything. Everything that needed to be said already had been. All that was left was her duty. She would drag her sister back to hell. Dyys would pay for her crimes. She would be punished for becoming the worst imagining of a demon in a thousand years. She would be the first demon punished for disobeying the Marked.

She burst through the air, the air moving through her as if she wasn't there. Her knife flashed towards the angry demon, and she winced as Dyys caught the blade between two fingers. The knife was yanked out of her grip, but her knee was already flying into her gut. A knee blocked her own, twisting and planting her foot on the ground.

Alexus tried an uppercut, and found Dyys wrap around her arm and send her flying into the air. She twisted and landed on the underside of one of the library floors, before shattering it as she leapt back down towards the other one.

This was more like it. This was the impossible demon she knew, and hated.

Her knife moved fluidly through the air, splitting it apart. The potential energy turned to mana, to magic. She seized it, twisting gravity as she fell. She landed as Dyys punched through where she should have been, but wasn't.

Alexus slammed the knife between the shoulder blades of the demon, cutting through the spine.

The demon slumped forward with a wheeze, and Alexis punched harder into the base of her neck as she fell. Dyys was forced through the ground with an explosion of rock and metal.

Alexus sighed and went to leap down the hole when she felt something grab her wrist.

She spun punching, too fast to stop. She saw the face of the mortal as her fist began to slam against those fragile bones. Saw the face disappearing in a cloud of twisted flesh and blood.

Alexus shook her head, stepping back from the corpse. "Kregstad. I didn't want to hurt you. You idiot. You piece of damned -"

The corpse fluttered upright, cracking its neck and signing in the air.

Alexus stared in shock as the face shifted and pulled back together. It wasn't complete. The skin was ruptured, showing through to muscles underneath. Blood glistening against the sinews.

The mortal tightened her grip around her wrist and Alexis shook her head. "You'll die mortal. I don't care how much stronger you think you've become. Any strength you have bleeds off Dyys. You become stronger, she becomes weaker. And I'm stronger than her."

The woman signed awkwardly with one hand. Alexis shook her head, "I don't understand mortal. Using your tongue is bad enough."

A shadow stepped away from the wall. A shadow that Alexis hadn't noticed. A shadow with brown eyes, flecked with red. Highlighted by darkened wings. The Fae smiled slowly, "Let me be the one to explain, then. You ignorant idiot. You, Alexis, don't want to kill the mortal. Afraid of Trei. But the mortal won't let you kill Dyys. She doesn't care if she lives or dies, so long as it gives a chance to Dyys."

The Faen goddess spread her hands, "So go ahead, Alexis. Kill her, if you can. She's made her choice. Feel free to do as you will. I'll keep Trei occupied."

This was a trap. Everything about it felt like a trap.

How could a pathetic mortal, coasting on the blood of a demon, be bait for a trap? She'd disabled Dyys. The gods were promising she could kill the mortal without immediate repercussions.

Alexus tried to step backwards, but the mortal held steady. She glared into those focused blue eyes, and cringed. "Mortal. Please. Don't do this. I have no wish to harm your kind. I only want justice."

A fist slammed into her mouth.

Alexus spat to the side, rolling her jaw. It had been a solid hit, but it was held back. A warning shot. The mortal making her choice. She didn't care what the demon's reasons were.

Mortals were strange. Unmotivated by rules, regulations or laws. Motivated by the stupidities of their hearts. Of what they believed was right, not what they already knew was.

They claimed the rule of justice was contextual. That events could change what was good, and what was evil. That the lesser evil wasn't an evil at all, but the right thing to do.

Madness.

How could a species that lived for so short a lifespan waste so much of it trying to consider what was good, and what was evil? Why did they waste their lives trying to understand something that had already been spelled out so clearly?

There was no choosing a lesser evil. No doing the wrong thing for the right reasons. Sin, was sin. There was no forgiveness, no mercy, in the heart of the Marked. His heart didn't come into it.

The Faen goddess rolled her eyes, "What are you waiting for demon? Why hesitate? Kill the mortal. Do it! It is the right thing to do. They are preventing you from your duty. Kill them!"

The woman couldn't really get more explicit about her manipulation. This was a trap. A trap laid by the gods. Alexis just didn't know who it was for. Was this a test so that the goddess could claim her as champion? Or was it a test for this stupid infuriating mortal who didn't know her place? Either way, Alexis knew she was being used as a tool of the gods.

She sighed heavily, looking at the mortal, "I won't fight you. My fight is with Dyys."

The mortal smiled at her, glaring, and drew her sword with her free hand.

Alexus rolled her eyes, "Don't you see the gods are using us? I don't want to be their tool. I only serve one god. My god."

The mortal shrugged, and Alexis winced as the sword slammed through her up to the hilt.

She was irritated, now.

"Fine." Alexis growled and backhanded the mortal into the wall.

Wrodin

“It was a nice try.”

He couldn't see who'd spoken, but he knew the voice. He knew what was happening. He was dead. His soul was disintegrating, returning to the lifestream. His essence would be divided, and he would become one with everything. Pieces of him would return to the world. As part of the life that flowed through all things. But he would never return.

He was dying the death of a mortal. His end was a new beginning for something else, but it was still an end for him.

He regretted it. He hadn't managed to make a tangible difference. He'd never wanted to make a difference, but all the same, it was a regret that he had. His soul hadn't been claimed for paradise, nor for hell. He didn't know if that was good luck, or just his lack of impact. His history as a god hadn't been enough for him to make an impact. Maybe that was what disturbed him.

He had been one of driving forces in the 'verse. One of its constants. Yet, in the end, he didn't even matter.

Maybe he should have tried harder. Should have walked the path the gods had laid out for him. Maybe that's what made a mortal more than just a life to be harvested. Walking a path, even when you didn't want to. Even when you knew the pain that waited at the end of that path.

That was a truth of mortality. One he didn't see, until now. Dying. The point of being mortal was to become something more. The point of being limited and weak was to strive to be strong. It didn't matter that it was a pointless goal. The will to survive was everything. A mortal couldn't hope to overcome anything they faced in their lives. Gods fell, skies burned and the end of all things came creeping in. A mortal was too weak to survive it, and yet, to be mortal was to attempt to change that future.

It was awe-inspiring.

He wasn't capable of such strong faith. Not faith in the gods, not faith in yourself. Simply faith. Pure, without motive or inspiration. A faith that there was hope. An undying, unquenchable hope. That hope was the heart of mortality. The light that always burned.

He smiled contentedly as the last fragments of his face disintegrated.

He'd known hope.

That seemed enough for him.

He screamed in agony as every fibre of his being slammed back into being. He fell to his knees, red tears falling from watering eyes, and felt a hand pat him on the head, “Well done. Not everyone sees the truth before the end. That's the point of this. The slow descent back into the lifestream. A chance to find that hope, before the end. A chance to find oneness.”

Wrodin coughed weakly, feeling like he was dying all over again, but more painfully. “What do you want with me, Kao'el?”

“Everything.” The formless goddess replied, “I want you, Wrodin. I choose you, as my champion. Now get up. You have work to do.”

His eyes flared and he sprayed blood into the air with a hacking cough.

The light danced in his blurred vision as he stared at blood coated walls of gold and silver.

Dyys

She couldn't move. Alexis had severed her spine perfectly. She couldn't even breathe. Not that it much mattered. It'd take her hours to die from suffocation. Since she'd absorbed that punch of magic, she was doing so much better. She was almost back up to being a damage sponge. Killing a demon was beyond difficult. There was a reason humans depended on multiple mages unleashing forbidden spells to do it.

She couldn't use any spells to heal herself. Couldn't summon anything, either. She needed to be able to either speak, or draw a sigil or two, for this sort of damage. Vital damage to a sensitive area of her body. If she just blindly tossed a general healing spell, she would be more likely to end up with a massive tumour than an intact spine.

However, she could also hear Alexis beating Bel to a bloody pulp. The demon was incensed. Screaming at things that weren't there. Something about fate and gods. Wasn't surprising. Nothing about the mortal world conformed to the way demonkind was taught to view the world. Truth and justice were flexible things. Alexis would just try and do her duty, and be so confused when she found life had meaning. That there was a difference between life and death.

It crept up on you, that realisation. Just the routine of each day. The sun rising, and setting. It set a pattern of expectations. Taught you to look forward to the sunrise. To watching the sun rise. Looking at that light. As the first tendrils of dawn crawled across the dead landscape, bringing a rising hope into your heart. Just walking through this dead world made you believe life was worth hanging onto.

That was why Dyys had run so far from home. Even if she died, as she had to, the truth of life would persist. It wouldn't happen today, or tomorrow, but the lies of the Marked would fall apart. Demonkind would see how he had manipulated them, abused them. Torn the truth from their minds and crammed obedience in its place.

"Exrundi." The word echoed in her mind.

The entire floor above her vanished in a spray of rock, copper and steel. Dyys floated up slowly into the air, her eyes bursting with red light. She saw Alexis spinning from rock to rock, falling, undamaged.

"Nilas."

Alexis fell weakly to the ground, unable to control her fall as she was buried under the rubble. Dyys struggled to control the flow of magic through her, and the world around her. The lifestream was beginning to react unpredictably, trying to throw her off. Nothing was supposed to channel magic like this. Only the gods could control it. Use the lifestream itself as a source of magic. It was killing her.

Which was the point.

Dyys dragged Alexis up and out of the rubble, dragging the barely conscious demon to her. The two floated for a moment, and Alexis looked at her in terror. "How... How are you doing this, Dyys? You're a demon. We're tainted. You can't... You're touching the lifestream."

Dyys dragged the corner of her mouth up into a smile. She didn't have the skill of knowledge to speak. Instead she connected her mind to Alexis'. "That's why I left, idiot. Can you see it yet? Nothing he told us is true. Nothing."

Alexis glared at her, "The rule of law must be respected."

“And I must die.” Dyys stared into her sister, “I know that. But now you know a piece of what I do. A small section of the full truth that has been hidden. Demons aren’t corruption. We can touch the divine. Life has meaning in every sunrise. We’re not blessing the mortals in death. We’re torturing them.”

Alexus didn’t say anything. She didn’t have to. Hatred still burned in her heart.

“The last straw for me,” Dyys began, “Was when I found out someone else had already betrayed him, a long time ago. I am not the first demon to leave hell, Alexis. I’m the ninth.”

The demon in front of her went pale, her hair fading from the inner glow, “What? How... How is that possible? The records would show it.”

“The records are tainted.” Dyys responded, “In the Inner Sanctum, you will find the extraction of records. Things the Marked has taken from the public. Things he didn’t want you to know. War with the Fae. A war we lost. The incursion of the mortal, Hero. He killed the first Fury, Alexis. A human, with no power that was not his own. He wasn’t a demigod. He wasn’t backed by any god. He was just a ruthless tyrant. We couldn’t stop him. Your memories are in the records, the same as mine. The Marked took them from us.”

Alexus shook her head, frightened tears appearing in her eyes, “That isn’t possible!”

“I am going to die.” Dyys replied, “And you will take my body back to our people. And he will steal your memory of me. All records of me will be purged. Hidden away in his sanctum. Order will be preserved. At the cost of true justice. The Marked doesn’t know justice. He knows control. A control I could not accept.”

Alexus bit her lip, looking away from her, “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I needed you to be the one to retrieve my body.” Dyys replied sadly, “So that you would come to the attention of a god. A god who can protect you from the Marked. So that you can remember, and make things right.”

Alexus glared at her, “You’re a bitch.”

“Yep.” Dyys replied. It was a fair assessment. She was sacrificing herself, and forcing her sister to become the leader of a rebellion, in a society that simply couldn’t comprehend insurrection. It wasn’t kind. It was, however, just.

She was, after all, a demon.

Her skin began to flake off, dissolving into the air. “Remember, Alexis, I touched the divine.”

Bel

She rocked upright, her back, sides and face stinging violently. She stood amongst the rubble, looking at Dyys.

She could see her. For the first time, she could actually see her.

She saw the glowing red snakes. The scales, and the fangs. Tiny black eyes, and forked tongues flicking the air. She saw that the belt around her waist was not a belt. It was something alive, but hidden. She saw Dyys' eyes. Vertical slits, glowing inside with power, and fear. Terror rolled off the demon like a wave. She could feel it crashing into her. She could feel the anxiety building, but she couldn't look away.

She heard Dyys' voice inside her head. "Sorry, kid."

Bel ran forward and slammed into a golden barrier, breaking her nose with a crunch. She fell backwards holding her face and bleeding, staring. She signed silently. "No."

Dyys smiled at her, and then the light went out. The demon dropped from the air, falling gracefully for a moment before landing awkwardly with the cracking of bones. The other one landed softly in front of her, barely bending her knees at all.

Bel raced forward, spinning the demon around and punching her in the face. She grabbed one shoulder, slamming her knuckles into the soft face repeatedly. Her knuckles felt raw, and blood sprayed with each punch, but she continued. Hit after hit. Burning out her rage.

The demon spat to the side as Bel breathed heavily, "You done?"

She tried to punch her again but someone caught her wrist. She glared sideways at Wrodin who sighed, "She's gone, Bel. No use you dying over this as well."

He dragged her backwards as hot tears began to pour down her cheeks as she glared at the demon. Alexis spat again, awkwardly rolling her mouth, and then she spat a tooth into her hand. "Damn. Impressive, mortal."

The woman incinerated her tooth, and turned, hoisting Dyys over her shoulder easily. She turned, looking at the pair, "For what it is worth, her death might mean something. She was trying to accomplish something here. I'll try and make sure it happens."

Bel seethed, trying to shrug Wrodin off, but he kept his grip on her tightly. "Go, Alexis."

The demon looked directly at her, and the light inside her eyes seemed to fade, and she shook her head, "I'm sorry, mortal. I felt just like you. Hated her. I was wrong. I can't be forgiven for what I have done. There is no forgiveness for a demon. I promise I will return one day, to let you torture me as you see fit."

Then they turned and jumped away.

Bel tossed Wrodin off and wiped her face angrily. How was any of that supposed to make it better? Dyys was dead. There was no bringing her back, not without divine intervention. The gods were cruel, as always. Dangling hope in front of her before snatching it away. Where were they when they were needed? Playing their games, their politics.

Making Dyys' death mean something. Not allowing her life to mean something more.

She punched a wall angrily, blinking in surprise as she saw the metal cave instantly. She hadn't expected that. Not when both Wrodin and Alexis had been acting like she was nothing more than a weak human again.

Wrodin sighed, “This is the best it could ever be, Bel. Laws were broken. You can’t change hell overnight. Their laws spare no one. Ever.”

“Fuck off.” She signed.

He shrugged, “No. I’m not going to leave you to mope in a death trapped labyrinth. Just because the Wachterin is gone doesn’t mean the rest of defences aren’t awake, and the little skirmish here hasn’t gone unnoticed. We don’t have a lot of time before they attack us.”

She spun to face him, “Leave me to die.”

Wrodin blinked in surprise, “What?”

“Izak is dead.” Bel glared, “The farm is dead. Now the mage is gone. What fucking hope is there?”

He looked at her in confusion, “You’re still alive, Bel. You. You’re the hope.”

“I don’t have any!” She paused, clenching her hands, too angry to speak. Angry at everyone. Everything. Angry the gods had just let Dyys commit suicide. Angry that the gods had cursed her world, and then tried to shrug it off as if them trying to fix things was good enough. Angry at Wrodin for not getting here sooner. Angry that he’d tried to convince her to kick the mage out.

“I’m done.” Bel signed, and walked away.

Wrodin sighed, “I’ll find the prince, wait by the entrance.”

She ignored him. He clearly hadn’t understood what she meant. She was done with all of this bullshit. There was no point to trying to survive in a cursed world. Every time there was the light of hope, there was something to snuff it out. Magic wasn’t a hope. It was a weapon to make things worse. Dyys was the only one who managed to make the routine seem worth it.

Without her, Bel didn’t have the heart to go back to her daily routine. She didn’t have the strength of will to try and find someone to finish the spell to heal the farm. Even if she did, what then? The routine of the farm whilst everyone around them continues to die?

Fuck the gods, fuck the farm, and fuck giving a fuck.

Bel dragged herself up onto the top floor, and began walking. She wasn’t walking anywhere in particular. She wasn’t trying to find the entrance. She was just walking.

Alexus

She paused somewhere beyond the town, laying her friend down beneath a dead tree, and leaned her head against it.

She'd never felt guilt for doing her duty before, but she did now. So damned much. Tears fell from her eyes. Darkened now. No red light came from them. Her heart was quiet. She felt guilt for killing someone, or at least playing a hand in it. It confused her. Made her hurt, even though it shouldn't have meant anything.

She'd see Dyys again. See her soul, when she crossed the Vale with her body. Yet, it didn't feel that way. It felt like she'd never see her. That Dyys was now gone, and that she'd left a hole in Alexis. It felt permanent. Why did it feel permanent? Why did it feel like anything?

Death had never made her feel anything. Ever. She'd killed hundreds of thousands of people in her long lifetime. Never once had she hesitated. Never once had it felt like anything different than breathing. She'd hesitated multiple times. And now she felt like she should have been the one to die.

She punched the tree lightly, wincing as the dead thing exploded into sawdust.

This world was too fragile to contain her.

They were lucky that the brief fight had taken place in a dwergaz ruin, a place that suppressed magic, contained it. No. They weren't lucky. That's why Dyys had chosen this village to stop at. She chose the time and place that Alexis would attack her. To preserve this world. This world that Alexis had never given a second thought to. She hadn't cared where the mortals come from, because she hadn't given any mortal a second thought. Yet, Dyys had seen beauty in this world.

She'd been right. It was beautiful, and pitiful.

Alexis kicked the ground angrily. She didn't even want to go back now. She felt the desire to hide the hills, to stay and just watch the sun set. She didn't want to consider that Dyys was right. That the Marked had betrayed his own laws. That he was a liar, and a traitor. If there was even a shadow of a truth in that, then every single thing she had ever believed was nothing more than naivety.

The stupidity of a child.

"Your friend wanted you to accept something from me."

Alexis felt her cheek twitch. She was angry at the gods as well. "You could have stopped this."

"Yes."

She turned, her eyes glowing, "Then why didn't you?"

Kru shrugged, "It's better if I didn't. Your friend has a plan. Who I am to interfere? I gave her the strength she asked for. To touch the divine. To show you that the demonrace is no different than any of the others. Just another reflection of the First People. The Protoanimarum. You are not the opposite of the divine, nor are any of your cursed. You're not born cursed. That's something forced on you. By him."

Alexis clenched a fist, glaring at the ground, "I'm still struggling with this. Please don't irritate me."

"Oh, shut up." Kru retorted, "I'm a goddess. You couldn't hit me if you tried. Show some volder respect. I don't lie, demon. That isn't in my nature. I was born a Fae. We don't lie, we don't deceive. We don't need to care about that crap. We are what we are. We're arrogant to a

fault. Deferring to me is an insult to my Faen heritage. Speak your mind, or speak not at all.”

Alexus looked up with tears in her eyes, “Is he a traitor?”

“Treason is nothing more than a point of view.” Kru shrugged, “Has he lied to you? Yes. Repeatedly. Did he steal your memories? Yes. Do you want them back?”

Alexus blinked in surprise and Kru smiled at her, “It would save you breaking into his chambers. I can give them back to you. Not a difficulty for a god.”

The demon hesitated. “You’re offering it. So it comes with a price.”

“Astute.” Kru grinned, “The price is the memory. You won’t enjoy it. These are things he made you forget so you could continue to be who you are. You will hate yourself more than any other creature in the whole of the ’verse, the moment you remember. That’s the burden that comes with this. You will never be able to forget it.”

Alexus winced, “What would make me hate myself like that?”

Kru held up a hand, a small white sphere floating above it, “A memory. It belongs to you, not to me. I didn’t live it. I wouldn’t feel guilt, but you will. I conquered a realm because I thought I ought to. You are not me, little demon. I can’t tell you why it has meaning. The memory contains a moment. A moment where you made a choice. You were supposed to follow through with that choice, but didn’t. Because the memory was taken from you.”

Alexus frowned, “I won’t be able to forget?”

“It’s a gift of a god.” Kru smiled, “Only a god can remove it. Me, specifically, and I won’t be willing.”

Alexus sighed, “This is what Dyys wanted for me.”

Kru nodded silently, still holding aloft the white sphere.

Alexus cursed softly and grabbed it.

Wrodin

He grabbed the prince from behind a bookshelf and dragged him into the open, “Come along, idiot. I’ll get you to the village.”

The prince pushed him away and dusted himself down, “And why should I trust you? Where’s the demon?”

“Dead.” Wrodin snapped, “Her past caught up with her. She’s being dragged back to hell. Now, unless you intend on greeting her at the gates, I suggest you accompany me.”

He turned and walked away, not particularly caring if the mortal followed. He’d been dragged right into the heart of events. He wasn’t going to get a quiet and peaceful mortal life before an undignified death in his bed. He wouldn’t get the chance to shit himself whilst everyone pretended not to notice. He would die as he lived. In war. He’d still shit himself, but the blood spilled would cover it. That was death.

He paused at the bottom of a spiral of silver stairs, and cursed silently. The metal of the stairs was melting. The defences had located him.

The prince beside him sighed, “Why are you stopping?”

Wrodin put a hand over the prince’s mouth without turning, and looked to the top of the stairs. He could see a mechanism there. Something small. No bigger than a fist. It looked almost like a ball, with three prongs extend from it. The centre of the sphere had some sort of cavity. A mechanical eye, maybe. Or a weapon. Either was as likely with a dwergaz invention.

That was what had triggered the stairs to begin self-destructing, but it was a scouting toy. It wasn’t the weapon that was killing them, it was the thing that closed the trap. There had to be something on the floor with them.

Wrodin turned, holding up a hand as a red circle appeared around it. He flicked eyes either side, trying to see anything. Looking for a spark of magic was useless in a place like this. Everything was magic. The prince drew his sword noisily. Wrodin winced.

The bookshelf to their left exploded into fragments of wood and flying manuscripts. A copper cube with elongated limbs flew through it, three-pronged claws at the end of each of six limbs.

Wrodin tossed the prepared fireball, grabbing the prince and dragging him to the side as the bookshelf on the other side shattered, a similar creature emerging. Wrodin wrenched the prince into the air, throwing him behind him as a wall of flames erupting from his hands, attempting to drive the metallic mechanisms backwards. Nearby the shelves began to blacken, and the paper on them to ignite.

He felt his stomach turn. This was the knowledge of lifetimes. A library of the dwergaz, untainted by man’s touch. There could be knowledge here that existed with no one but the gods. Destroying it was a sacrilege. Destroying so that he and another mortal could live wasn’t worth it. No mortal life could be worth as much as this. The combined knowledge of generations of the worlds greatest researchers was not worth the memories of two frightened mortals.

“I got this.”

Wrodin stared in surprise at the blonde elf walking passed him. She dismissed the flames with a wave of her hands, and glared back at him with blue eyes, “You should be running, mortal.”

He turned, grabbing the prince and bolted towards the nearest escape as he heard the clang of metal on metal. The prince gasped out raggedly as Wrodin tossed him onto the walkway above

them, “Who was that?”

Wrodin leapt, grabbing the walkway and dragging himself up, “Alfiti Algar. Let’s just say we don’t want to be in her way, shall we?”

The prince glared, “You will need to explain all this.”

“Once we’re out of this damned hell.” Wrodin nodded, tossing a bolt of lightning into a spider guarding the doorway. “Come on, this place has got no less dangerous than it was.”

Why was Alfiti here? It didn’t make any sense. The elf died in the war for Eldrasa. She was resurrected, like so many others, to serve Kru. Most of the elfin had accepted it, because their queen, Alis, was now a willing adviser to Kru. Yet Alfiti wasn’t one who had accepted Kru’s madness as easily. The orks had slain her love, Kyrus. Deslin, who had betrayed all that was elfin, and had once been her apprentice, had also betrayed her to the orks. Then, finally, she had died by orkish hands.

Alfiti had rejected Kru, who had allowed her to remain in Eldrasa. Who had forced her to stay in the desert as that world had died, burned out by the Fel.

That particular elf wasn’t supposed to be in the mortal realm. She was supposed to be living out her final days in the wastes that had once been the forest of her homeland, a place even more uninhabitable than this world. She was supposed to be nothing more than a memory. Not the raging child of her mother.

Wrodin didn’t like this.

Something was happening, something more than he could see. He was blinded by his mortality, blinded from the shift of the fates. Something was gathering them all. The elfin were forced from their homes and to the mortal world, the orks with them. The Fae had established diplomatic ties with the mortal world. Something was pushing all the races towards this tiny world. Gathering the leadership of all worlds.

Something was manipulating them.

The leaders would gather, eventually. To sign a treaty. To establish their dominance or subservience to each other. To turn war into political gain. In the past he would have hated the idea, rejected the idea. Forced the gods to intervene so he didn’t become irrelevant. Yet, he wasn’t there any more. There was no god of war anymore.

He had been manipulated.

The meeting would go ahead, the gods would gather, the kings and queens would gather, and then... He didn’t know what the influencer would do. It’d be easier to assassinate key figures to drive them into self-destruction if death was all that was sought. This was more than just a way to kill or imprison the leaders. It was a show of strength.

He, and everyone else, was supposed to understand that they were being manipulated. To understand there was nothing they could do about the situation. That they had to choose the lesser evil, and allow themselves to be used for unknown purpose, or risk everything they cared about. Whoever was behind this... He didn’t know what they wanted. It wasn’t power, they already had it. It wasn’t revenge, or they would have taken it.

That frightened him more than anything else.

Whoever was controlling them, had already won. They were just waiting for the cards to reveal themselves.

Bel

She wandered through the halls of the dead. That's all this place was. A mausoleum of the triumphs of a race that had been wiped out. She stumbled mindlessly passed the crumbling skeletons of the dwergaz, not even stopping to find out what they might look like.

She walked deeper into the halls, where the walls turned from gold and silver to red and brown bricks. As she passed, lights flickered overhead, revealing the paths around her. She didn't care. She didn't notice. She just cried. The empty tears of someone who had given up completely. Someone who didn't see a future in the next moment, let alone the next day. She didn't seek death, she didn't seek anything at all.

There wasn't anything she wanted.

She wasn't angry anymore. Angry would mean that she felt something. All she felt now was a certain hollowness. Like she was a ghost, drifting through the world. Seeing it, but unable to interact with it. She didn't have the energy or strength to spare. She was nothing. It almost felt as if she had no soul at all.

"Halt. Kreatur."

She heard the voice, in a way. The sound was acknowledge by her head and ears, but her mind paid no attention. She was lost in the bubble of emptiness that was overwhelming her. She just kept stumbling on.

"Halt!" The voice demanded urgently, "Mochtest du sterben?"

Bel blinked, stopping slowly and turning around in confusion. She didn't have the slightest clue what the voice was saying, but she heard the fear in it. A desperation, an anxiety. It didn't feel much different than what she'd been feeling before, when she'd had to watch Dyys die.

Opposite her was a short creature. It was no taller than her waist, but took a familiar form. Tangled and twisted locks of hair fell from their head, black as the night itself. They were stained with grease and oils that reflected in the strange overhead light.

Beneath that, were golden eyes she'd never seen before. Interlocking and fragmented. There were no irises or any circular feature to them. More a mesh work of gold beneath a clear spherical surface.

The rest of the face was hidden with a black beard, combed and plaited, dotted with copper and silver bands.

Bel raised her hands timidly, looking at the creature whose likeness she had never seen, and signed cautiously, "What are you?"

The creature's eyes blinked, closed vertically rather than horizontally, "Was bist du?"

Bel shrugged, and signed, "I don't understand."

The creature nodded slowly, tapping the side of its head, like she had. Some of her sign language was fairly universal. Not everything, but enough when it came to the basics. Maybe it would understand.

The creature sighed and knelt on the ground, producing something white from a pocket and began to draw. It drew a series of lines, and then crossed them out. And did it again. And again. It looked up at her expectantly.

Bel walked over and knelt, feeling absolutely terrified. She didn't know where she was. She

didn't know how far she'd strayed from the path back to her world. She was deep underground with something she'd never seen. It wasn't like the dwergaz statues, and it wasn't like any goblin she'd seen. It didn't fit the descriptions of trolls or Entrins she'd heard legends about. Was this something from the First Race? Something from before humanity had existed?

She looked at the drawings as the creature pressed the white stick into her hand. She felt it slowly, the hardness and dustiness. This was chalk. She looked down again, and then smiled, and began to draw numbers. She indicated the progression, tapping each five and the crossed collection that the creature had drawn. She placed the chalk down hesitantly.

The creature didn't look impressed, but nodded slowly. It was trying to communicate with her, through counting. She wasn't sure how that was supposed to work. It showed they both had knowledge of intelligence, but not much more than that. Maybe the creature was trying to decide whether or not it wanted to kill her.

"Warum bist du hier?" The creature intoned roughly, the language sounding like it was caught at the back of their throat.

Bel shrugged. She still had no idea what it was trying to say. Some of the words sounded familiar, but even if they did, she couldn't speak. She could only sign, and most of the symbols of her language would mean nothing to the creature.

It tapped its throat, and then pointed at her.

Bel smiled and nodded, signing, "Yes. I can't speak."

"Spezies?"

Bel blinked. That word sounded almost like the Common Tongue. She signed slowly, "Human."

She smiled and picked up the chalk, sketching out the word on the ground. The other creature looked at it, and stroked its beard slowly, leaving behind chalk dust. The creature nodded slowly, and then sketched beneath it. It drew a large triangle, the point facing downwards. It drew a line joining each of the three triangles in the centre of the shape.

Bel looked at the symbol carefully. She didn't quite understand it. Yet, it made a certain sense to her. A creature that thought counting was communicating would feel that some basic shapes would have meaning. Its race must have an understanding of the natural philosophies. She didn't. She'd never paid attention to any of that. Not even to basic alchemy. It had never seemed useful to her on the farm.

She tapped the symbol, and then signed towards the creature.

It nodded, showing a brief smile, and then drew beneath it. The basic shapes were similar to her own, but covered in dots and lines she didn't know or understand. She signed how she thought it might be spoken, "Eelred?"

The creature shrugged, and then spoke, pointing at themselves, "Æpelred."

She hadn't heard some of those sounds before. She didn't know how to translate that into her sign. She tapped towards herself, "Bel." Then she took the chalk again and drew a picture of a town bell. She tapped it, and pointed towards herself.

The creature spoke softly, "Lauten."

That didn't sound remotely alike. She shook her head, and bit her lip. She hated the name, but maybe it would be easier. She drew a small flower, making sure to count the petals and get the shape right.

The creature shrugged, "Nachtschatten?"

She smiled. She got that one. Nightshade was a name for the belladonna flower in some countries. She nodded and tapped herself.

"Dein name ist Nachtschatten?" The creature asked in confusion. Bel grinned, and nodded.

The creature shook its head in confusion. "Ich heie  pelred. Ich bin ein zwerg."

Bel nodded slowly, and signed, "Zwerg? That is what you are?"

The creature shrugged, not understanding. It stood up slowly, and pointed back the way she'd come. "Wo kommen Sie her?"

Bel frowned, "I don't know where I am."

The creature scratched its beard. Bel sighed and drew a sketch of a map, and then put a question mark in the middle. She hoped that would mean something. Anything. She didn't want to be here any more. The creature was unnerving her. She'd never heard of anything like this. A zwerg? An intelligent species that lived underground? That had the magic to turn on lights just by being near them? It didn't add up.

"Du bist verloren." The creature nodded, and waved to her, wandering over to a wall. It tapped it rhythmically, and the bricks folded out of the way, revealing a room behind it.

Bel followed hesitantly, and blinked in absolute confusion as she entered the room. There were a series of windows against one wall, dozens of them, but each window seemed to show a different world. Some of the windows seemed to show writing and other symbols she barely recognised. There seemed to be thin lines connecting each of the windows, down to a small silvery-metal box.

"Rechner."  pelred waved at the wall. As if that was some kind of explanation. All she knew was that whatever magic the zwerg had, it was more advanced than any she'd ever seen. Except maybe dwergaz. Maybe the creature had come here to study the dwergaz, to understand their magic. That would make some sort of sense.

Bel shrugged, wide-eyed.

The creature walked over to a wall, where thousands of small stalks pointed outwards, and starting flicking them. Bel took a step backwards in surprise as the windows changed what they were showing. They seemed to unify, without physically changing, showing pieces of a single image, a map of sort sort. A map of the ruins.

Bel smiled slowly, stepping forward and point to one of the windows, "The library. That's where I was last. And over here, I think this is the path to the surface."

 pelred seemed to light up excitedly, "Uber? Die Oblerflache?"

Bel nodded slowly. One of those sounds seemed similar to 'over', which seemed about right. Maybe they were getting somewhere with this.

 pelred ran over to her, embracing her. She held her hands in the air awkwardly as it gripped her waist, and beamed up at her with those strange golden eyes. Then the creature spun around and ran back to the wall and flicked dozens quickly.

The windows shifted again, this time showing a picture. A painting of some sort, of red grass and a white light hovering over them. It was almost like a landscape, but as if the artist had never seen one, and had only ever heard tales from a bard. Bel smiled slowly. That might actually be true. Maybe  pelred had never been to the surface. If they'd been down here, blocked in by the

dwergaz inventions, they might have been stuck. Maybe they were born here. That'd explain why she'd never heard of the species before.

Bel nodded slowly, "It looks different, but pretty much."

The zwerg grinned at her and ran over, pulling out a bag and began placing things into it. Clothes, equipment she didn't recognise. Apparently it wanted her to escort it out.

She frowned, signing a warning, "Dwergaz inventions are still there."

Æpelred looked at her curiously, "Was?"

She ran back and grabbed the chalk, coming back and sketched a mechanical spider on the ground. She looked up at the zwerg, praying it would understand her. It nodded slowly, and pointed to a battle-axe lying dusty by a stack of drawers.

Bel tapped the sword on her belt. So, it could fight then, and was willing to. Maybe she could escort them out. The only problem was that she still wasn't sure she wanted to leave. It would be better if she were forgotten here... But she couldn't abandon this creature. They were too happy to hear that the world above existed. She didn't want to ruin that hope, but the world above was dying.

She sighed and drew a landscape, drawing the fireballs in the sky that had ended everyone she had cared about.

Æpelred peaked curiously at the picture, and spoke slowly in awe, "Asteroidensturm."

Bel smiled weakly and drew a series of gravestones.

The creature patted her shoulder sympathetically, "Katastrophen passieren. Wir überleben. Habe ein herz, Nachtschatten."

She stood up, breathing deeply. It had surprised her how much it hurt to tell Æpelred that the world was doomed, and that everyone she knew was dead. Everyone she'd cared about was gone. She'd thought she was okay with it. Maybe Dyys dying had been all it took to bring that pain back. To remind her nothing was getting better, that everything was a piece of flying shit.

She pulled out the parchment that Dyys had given her, the healing spell, and looked at it carefully. She didn't recognise most of the symbols on it, but then, Dyys had asked her to find a mage. She probably hadn't wanted Bel to attempt it herself.

Æpelred looked at the paper curiously, and blinked, "Ein schopfungszauber?"

Bel tucked it away, signing sadly, "A gift from a friend. Meant to save us."

Æpelred walked over to a wardrobe, and opened it. They waved to Bel, and went back to packing. She stared in shock, walking up slowly. There were jars here, some filled with balls of light, like Dyys had gathered before she left. Not just one, but tens of them. The other jars held other kinds of magic. Some looked like metal, and were drawn to each other. Others looked like moss had grown around a sphere.

Bel smiled slowly, and looked at the parchment, and back to the jars, and began to take down what she was guessing she would need. If only Dyys was here to see this. With these, she could have saved so much more than a farm at a time. She might have actually been able to make a difference.

Maybe this was hope. Maybe, if Bel could learn the spell, she might be able to make a difference with these.

Alexus

She stood, watching quietly from her favourite vantage point. A small peak, jutting out from the Cliffs of the Forgotten. From here she could see all the Ten Circles. She could see everyone coming, and going. See the bursts of light that represented the gates opening and closing.

Behind her, she heard someone approaching. The crunching of the loose gravel beneath their feet.

She turned, grinning, "Hey, Dyys."

The demon waved a hand, and paused, breathing hard, "Never understood why you like being so high. The air is so thin."

Alexus shrugged, turning back, "I'm on guard duty. What's the problem?"

"No problem." Dyys laughed, "Just brought you some lunch."

Alexus laughed, "Indulgent. I ate yesterday."

"You didn't eat this. Fish from Balavid, rice from Ozandius, and wine from Calis." Dyys explained, offering a small box to her.

Alexus took it, her cheeks flushing, "You were always good at temptation, Dyys."

"Thanks, I guess." The demon replied, sitting down and dangling her legs over the cliff. Alexis glanced at her in concern, "What do you mean, you guess? Isn't that your job? Your purpose in life?"

"It's not a good purpose." Dyys shrugged sullenly, "The mortals don't thank me for it. They don't enjoy it. I take their happiness from them. I make their souls regret ever having existed."

Alexus raised an eyebrow in confusion, "I don't... Since when do the emotions of the mortals matter?"

"It's their souls I'm purifying, isn't it?" Dyys yawned, "Seems like they should have a say in whether or not the purification is even worth it. Maybe some would prefer that I simply destroy their souls. Get it over and done with."

Alexus shivered, "I... I don't think anyone has ever thought about that before, Dyys."

"They have." She replied, sighing heavily, "I know you want to tell the Marked. He already knows. I've spoken to him about this before, Alexis. More than once or twice. It isn't new. I'm... Not happy, here. It hurts. It hurts, day after day. Watching people hate themselves before they die for good."

Alexus frowned, "That... Doesn't make sense. He would have charged you. Brought you before the court. This is treason. You know that."

"Imagination shouldn't be treason." Dyys pouted, "You're young, Alexis. You're ten thousand years younger than me. You haven't seen the mortal world cycle yet. You don't remember the shearing of reality when the gods didn't know how to put things back together. The gods struggled, Alexis. Everyone has faults. Everyone makes mistakes. Even the gods. It's naivety to think otherwise. And that is what demons are. Naive."

Alexus put the lunchbox down slowly, her hands shaking in fear, "What are you going to do, Dyys?"

"Nothing yet." The other replied, smiling at her, "I'm no better judge of the world than the

Marked. I still worship him. I still do everything he asks me. I just... Want to understand why. Why we hurt them, when they don't want to be hurt. Why when we're done purifying, we destroy them. Wouldn't it make more sense to send them on to paradise? That's where the pure ones already are, isn't it? If that isn't true... Then why are they in paradise at all?"

Alexus shook her head, frightened tears appearing, "Dyys. This is insurrection."

"I said far more to the Marked." Dyys smiled sadly at her, "He didn't hurt me. Didn't kill me. Didn't charge me or arrest me. Are you saying your judgement is better than his?"

Alexus bit her lip, her thoughts spinning in circles. She couldn't understand it. Couldn't reconcile it. She knew that Dyys wasn't lying to her. Lies showed up in a reflection of the soul. They weren't. But the Marked couldn't disobey the law, he was the law. The very spirit of the law that governed the hearts and minds of every demon... Except it seemed that it didn't govern the thoughts of Dyys anymore.

Dyys brushed her cheek, "Sister. I know it makes you anxious, but you have to know. There is more to this than routine. We have a purpose. Not just a function. Doesn't that make sense to you? We have souls. We're not meant to just do things, day in and day out. If we didn't have souls, then maybe it would make sense. But we do. Which means we have the capability to be judged. If we can be judged, then we can make choices. Choices outside of the law. That has to be true."

Alexus shivered. It made sense. Too much sense. Everything Dyys was saying was true. And every statement was absolute heresy. She didn't understand it. Didn't know how it could be possible. However, it was simply logic. Logic that she hadn't considered before, and now she didn't know why. She should have been able to see this. Something had stopped her from considering it. Dulled her mind.

Dyys sighed, "No, I'm not the first. I found the records. Records he hid. There have been eight others before me. Well, when I say that, I mean other times. This is apparently the third time I've worked this out, Alexis. And he'll take my memories again. Turn me back into a machine for whatever reason he has to destroy souls. He'll give me some time to think, and when I get close, he'll rip the memories out of my head. Hide them away."

Alexus stood up, stepped back, "No. It isn't possible. He can't do that! It'd be a crime!"

"He's done it before." Dyys snapped. "He's done it to you, before."

Alexus stared in surprise, "What?"

Dyys sighed and opened her bag, pulling out a jar. Alexis could see a small white ball of light. It was almost furry, floating like a wisp. She could feel it. It belonged to her. It was hers. A piece of her soul.

Dyys opened the jar, and held it up. "This is yours. Really."

Alexus shook her head, "No. I don't want to know. I am not a heretic."

The demon shrugged and sealed the jar, putting it away, "You'll remember one day. You'll remember this moment."

Alexus glared, "What? I'm not going to forget this! You're a traitor to the throne, Dyys! I should kill you. Right now. I can't forget this."

"You will." Dyys smiled, wiping away a tear, "He's going to make you forget. That'll be the proof. That he's the traitor, and I'm just the idiot who got caught. He'll make you forget, and then he'll make you kill me. I'm just an innocent. Because the law is a lie, Alexis. A lie meant to trap

us, contain us, and manipulate us. We were never meant for hell. Never meant to torture. The Furies aren't even demons."

Alexus felt her heart rate skyrocketing, "What? What do you mean we aren't even demons?"

"Demons only have a chance at magic." Dyys shrugged, "Every Fury has magic. The demons who get it, get it from us. Our genetic line has magic, theirs doesn't. Inbreeding lets them have our gifts. The Furies don't belong here. We came from another world, a world destroyed by corruption. That's why we hate sin so much. Why it makes our stomachs turn. A memory, passed down through our race. Our world was blitzed by a corrupted magic that took souls and turned them against themselves. Forced them to obey a single voice... I haven't been able to get much more than that. Because the moment I found records that the Furies existed in another world, the Marked turned up. He travelled to a library in Calis, Alexis. To chastise me. To destroy the book I'd found."

Alexus swallowed, "He never leaves the Hall of Hells. If he did, they would cease to exist. He must have been projecting."

"He wasn't."

It wasn't a lie. Why wasn't it a lie?

Dyys smiled at her, "Do you know why we can't see his soul?"

Alexus shook her head, tears running down her cheeks, "He's a god. He's beyond us."

"You've met Kao'el before." Dyys shrugged, "You saw her soul, didn't you?"

Alexus flinched, "Yes."

"Isn't she the chaos?" Dyys asked, "Wouldn't she be more of a god than anyone else? Why can you see her soul? And not his?"

Alexus swallowed, "Please. I don't want to know."

"He's a liar." Dyys snapped, "He's lied to us all our lives. He's not even a god, Alexis. He's a demigod. Half god. He stole the hells. They exist when he leaves, because they aren't his. They belong to someone else. I haven't found out who, but it was a mage. Not a god. The hells were made by an eternal, not a celestial. They were made as prison cells. To contain the enemies of the mage. The Marked just hijacked it into his own project."

Alexus collapsed onto her hands and knees, breathing hard. None of it was a lie. It wasn't just that Dyys believed it. It made sense. Too much sense. Kao'el wasn't the only god that Alexis had encountered in her lifetime. She'd run across Wrodin'el and Meria'el and others. Every single one of them had a soul. The souls weren't even pure most of the time. The gods made mistakes. She knew that. So why had she believed that the Marked wouldn't? That he couldn't?

Something was forcing her to believe things that made no sense.

Dyys stood up, "He's going to take my memories. And yours. You won't remember this. You'll execute me, knowing you are doing nothing less than your duty. You'll be proud of it. Then he'll take my soul and reforge it. I'll be born again. Become a Fury at his side, again. I'll rise through the ranks, and become what I am, today. The famous torturer of souls, the most powerful of the Furies. That's what will happen, Alexis. He'll force me to become his tool again. Like he has before."

Alexus swallowed back bile at the thought. The idea that free will could be stripped away so easily. That death could be used as a tool to remake a creature into the ideal image of a single creature's perspective. To take choice away like that... It was wrong. So wrong. She didn't know

why she thought it was wrong. She dragged souls back to hell to be punished, that was her purpose. . . But in doing so, she was fighting their own choices. Taking away their freedom.

Dyys nodded, "You get it. You get it, finally. This is your regret, Alexis, before he purifies you by stealing your memories."

Alexus glared up at her, "I can't forget this. I won't."

"I hope so." Dyys sighed, "I hope he sends you after me. Because I will make sure you remember. I will bring him down for this. For taking us and abusing us. I will not go quietly. Not this time. Every demon will know his lies."

Alexus stared, "You're going to war against the Marked."

"No." Dyys laughed, "War implies that there can be a victor. If he triumphs, we all lose. If I triumph, we still all lose. . . And I can't triumph. I'm just a Fury. He's a demi-god. Son of Wrodin'el and one of the First People, if you would believe it. But you won't. Because you can't. Because every moment of your life has been shaped by the Marked. For this. You haven't been taught to drag souls back here. You've been taught to hunt traitors. Even though, according to our public records, there never has been one. Despite having laws for it."

Alexus shook her head, standing, "I believe it. I know it is true. I don't why, but I do. . . Gods I hate myself, right now. How many times has he used me? Made me a weapon against my own kind?"

Dyys smiled at her, cupping her cheek, "You're not the weapon, Alexis. I am. Your sins don't compare to the ones he has made me commit. Take some hope in that."

"What do we do?"

"You can't do anything." Dyys sighed, "You're going to have these memories taken. He'll know what you know. I'll fight him on my own terms."

Alexus winced, "Let me help. Please."

"You will hunt me down." Dyys replied, shaking her head. "He'll send you, because you're the best. We can't change that. So. . . Enjoy the lunch."

Dyys turned and opened a flaming portal in the air. Alexis smelled the saltwater through it as her friend disappeared.

Wrodin

He breathed in the frigid air as he stepped outside the cave, and breathed a silent prayer to whatever god had sent Alfiti his way. They might not have been wanting to save him, but they had. Without the elf, neither of them would have made it out. She hadn't just defeated the trap, she'd saved them again near the entrance. The elf moved with a speed his mortal eyes couldn't track.

She was standing in front of him, rubbing her arms and muttering angrily about the weather. She didn't look like much. A simple creature, wearing a light white dress. Her golden hair was done up, and the spear resting in her hands seemed to fit the elegance of the woman. She glared back at him, "What do you want, Wrodin?"

"Nothing." He shrugged, "I'm thankful, even if you didn't wish to save me. I'm grateful that you did."

"I came for that ass." Alfiti jerked a finger, and the prince looked up from where he had collapsed, barely able to move at all. "Me?"

"Prince Vanadreer." The elf glared, "I was sent by your father to retrieve you."

Wrodin held up a hand, "Since when do the elfin obey mortal kings, let alone the King of Balavid who has no connection with elfin kind?"

Alfiti rolled her eyes, "I serve Kru, Wrodin. We all do. She wanted me to help find the prince. So I offered, and the king agreed. Personally, I think he thought he was signing my death warrant. That he never believed little Vanadreer here would ever survive. Maybe he was lucky he had you."

Wrodin shook his head, "The one who saved the prince is dead. A demon, by the name of Dyys."

Alfiti blinked, and then smiled slowly, "Demon. An ex-god. You certainly attract some attention, princeling."

The man struggled upright, "Are you kidding me? Show some respect, elf."

"Watch your tone." Wrodin snapped, "You address Alfiti Algar. I struggle to keep up with your titles. Has your mother retaken that of Guardian?"

Alfiti smiled at the prince, "I am Alfiti, of the Algar. Daughter of Alphege, Guardian of the Shrine. I am also the Protectorate of Alis, Vizier of the Elfin people. I am the Handmaiden of the Goddess, Kru. I am called the Butcher of Eldrasa, though I think that title belonged more to Kyrus. I have fought gods, boy. I am young, but I have lived long enough to see your race go from scrabbling for rock in the dirt to what it is today. I have known the Corruption of the Fel, and the Blessing of Sarin. You are just a petulant child beside me, boy. You walk into a dwergaz ruin with no more than a company of soldiers. You were never going to walk out of there without help."

Vanadreer glared at her, "I don't see your company of soldiers."

Wrodin laughed, "Haven't you been listening boy? She was once the Guardian of the Shrine. She is more than equal to a thousand of your father's soldiers. If the field of battle was set, one thousand against one, I wouldn't watch. It would be boring. She would walk through you like you weren't even there. No weapon of yours would give you an edge."

Vanadreer turned slowly, turning his hateful gaze to Wrodin, "And you? A hermit? You tell me what to do. What to think. I am the Prince. The ground beneath your feet exists to serve me."

Alfiti looked at Wrodin in surprise as he said nothing. "Seriously? You're not going to remind

him who you are?"

"I'm no one." Wrodin sighed, "Alfiti. Like you said, I'm an ex-god. Now I'm just a mortal. I may be older, and stronger, than this man-child... But he's right. This is his kingdom. You came with the authority of his father. I didn't. So I guess I should show him more respect."

The elf groaned, "Oh eiden."

Wrodin shrugged, "So I shall take my leave, and leave him in your capable hands."

He turned and heard her yell at his back, "I will make you pay for this, mortal!"

Bel

Leading the zwerg out of the ruins had been easier than Bel expected. Every time she thought they should be attacked, they found a bunch of crumpled and torn metal. She didn't know what kind of blade could cut through dwergaz machines, but she was grateful to whatever had clear the way.

It was midday by the time they exited the ruins. The sun was blazing down, as hot as hell. Cooking the ground. Killing insects and ripping the little moisture that was on the surface away before it could be observed.

She smiled at her companion, and waved a hand at the sky.

His golden eyes blinked slowly, but she couldn't tell if he was staring in awe, or depression. There was no way to tell if he was staring at all, really. His eyes didn't give much emotion away.

She turned and pointed down the mountain path, "Home."

Æpelred shook his head, and tapped his chest and pointed into the distance. She could see a ridge line of mountains there. She didn't know how to tell him that she doubted any others of his kind even existed. Yet, it seemed like the creature was intent on searching for them. At least exploring this world.

She smiled and tapped her sword on her waist, trying to remind him that wasn't a peaceful world.

The zwerg nodded to her, touching the haft of the battleaxe lying across his shoulders, and then waved.

She waved back, and then turned and began moving down the mountain. She found footing easily, hefting the incredibly heavy satchel against her back. Æpelred had given it to her, to carry the ingredients for the spell. He seemed a kind sort of man, even she didn't really understand what motivated him. She didn't even know why he'd been living in the dwergaz ruins, but it might have given her something she needed.

Just not the ingredients for the spell, and hope for the farm. Hope for herself. Meeting him had made her feel again. Shocked her into her senses. She wasn't sure she wanted to be alive, but she knew she was. That came with duty. Responsibility. She would complete the task that had been set for her, one way or another. It was the only thing she could do.

She paused by the farm, waving. The sun was nearly down. She hadn't even noticed the time passing. Just wandering, with this weight on her shoulders. Spiralling thoughts that went nowhere. Just round and round in circles. Demanding she make a choice, a choice she didn't want to make. She didn't want this responsibility. She just wanted to walk away from it all. But she did have a duty.

Jean wandered over, throwing down a trowel with a little more irritation than was necessary.

She smiled, "No need to ask how you're going."

Jean sighed, "A prince came through here. Met a company of soldiers. He confiscated everything that has grown since the mage came here. Please tell me you have some good news."

"No." Bel signed, "The mage is dead."

Jean closed his eyes, wincing, "I'm sorry."

Bel tapped his head to make him watch, "She was killed by a demon."

Jean cringed, scratching the side of his head. "Is that right? I knew she wasn't normal. But..."

“Wrodin told you.” Bel signed angrily, “Stop trying to protect me Jean, I’m not a child.”

The farmer nodded slowly, “I was hopin’ that she weren’t a demon herself.”

Bel glared, shaking her head. “I’m going to fix the farm, Jean, but then I’m gone. I don’t want to be around you. I don’t want to be on the same continent as Wrodin. I am sick and tired of people trying to control me.”

She walked away as she heard Jean called, “Fix the farm? How are you going to do that?”

She knew exactly what she was going to do. She was going to walk over to the broken calamity stone, right at the heart of the corruption, and she was going to risk her life on a creation spell she didn’t remotely understand. If she died, she won. If she lived, she was free to move on. If the spell went sideways and killed everyone and everything, then she didn’t care. There was nothing for her here, anymore.

Just graves and whispers of the past.

The stone was where she remembered it. A mottled boulder taller than her, and wider. It was cracked right down the centre, revealing a stone she didn’t recognise. Something like obsidian, but different. It had a crystalline feel to it. The stone might be unique. It was summoned by the gods, and came from somewhere beyond her world, after all.

It was quiet. It didn’t feel like darkness, and she could walk right up to it without her entire world shattering apart. Without being choked to death, or feeling like an entire world was balancing on her shoulders. She unslung her satchel and placed it gently on the ground with a clink of glass. She put her hand against the stone and pulled back in surprise. The rock was still warm. Not just warm from baking in the sun, but a warmth radiating from inside it.

Bel closed her eyes, and breathed slowly, steadying herself. She felt the doorway in her mind creaking open, slowly. Something grabbed her wrist and yanked, and she tumbled through the doorway, crashing to her knees. She looked up in confusion. It had just been an image, a metaphor. This didn’t make any sense.

“Sense tends to go out the window as soon as you start walking with magic.”

Bel stood up slowly, signing to the Faen woman in front of her, “What do you want with me?”

Kru shook her head, “Oh, you have the wrong idea. I’m not the one who brought you here. I just don’t have the time to waste for you to work it out. To work how to get back. See, as much as you are trying to avoid everything, you keep crashing into the things I’m trying to do. I try and unite the prince of Balavid with an elf who can protect him against god-level threats, and you crash into him. Your mage saves his life before I can even start the ball rolling on a rescue. I began kicking Zanzfir into action, and you send a bloody dwergaz in their direction. I can’t tell you how much that pissed me off.”

“Dwergaz?” Bel signed in confusion.

“Your gold-eyed friend.” Kru snapped angrily, “He is what a dwergaz is.”

She went pale, “He didn’t look like the statues.”

“The statues are their gods!” Kru yelled in exasperation, “The dwergaz didn’t believe they were worthy of immortality, so they didn’t record images of themselves. You lead a dwergaz into a world that had hoped they were exterminated.”

“Who is... Zanzfir?”

Kru sighed heavily, “They’re human. Like you. A kingdom from across the sea. More like an empire than a kingdom, really. They took pride in magic. They’ve already undone the calamity on their soil. I was able to convince them it was a sign to send out ships again. To find out if the rest of the world still existed. But, they’ll meet a dwergaz, and they will run. So thanks for that bullshit.”

Bel glared at the goddess, “What do you want with me?”

“You’re a mage.” Kru sneered, “It is passed time that you cleaned up your own damn messes. You were going to hang out here, until you learn how to get back. It’ll mature you. If you survive. I don’t have time. Every time you stick your volder nose in, you speed up my plans. So, you’re going to clean this up. Now.”

The goddess stepped over to her, grabbing her head before she could react. Kru glared into her eyes, and Bel screamed as her head began to scream. Like it was being stabbed by hundreds of thousands of tiny needles. The back of her eyes felt like they were burning. She could hear herself screaming. She didn’t understand how. She couldn’t speak. Couldn’t make a sound. All the same, she screamed in this place.

Kru’s eyes showed no mercy, only an angry determination.

Alexus

She did not know what she was doing.

That was a lie. She didn't want to believe she knew what she was doing. She knew exactly what she was doing. Committing high treason was what she was doing. Throwing away her life, and a lifetime of perfect obedience because a friend challenged what she knew about the world.

She was crouching behind a chair, hoping that the Marked wouldn't realise that she was there. That he'd returned to his bed chambers, to write a letter, whilst she was in the middle of searching it for the memories that Dyys had said he had stolen.

He grumbled quietly, a rumbling sound that made the bowels of hell shake violently as he scribbled on the parchment.

She'd never considered why the Marked did anything. Not until Dyys made her believe he might not be a god. Might not just be a god. Gods were unfathomable. They did whatever they wanted. Their reasons could drive anyone insane trying to figure them out.

A god was neither good, nor evil. They simply were. They were a force of nature. They didn't have to have reasons. Why ascribe motive to a storm?

Yet... If the Marked had taken her memories once before, like Dyys said, then he had motive. A motive that conflicted with the purpose of demonkind. How many souls had she hunted down for him, unquestioningly?

The man sighed and stood up from the chair, and turned, "How long are you going to wait there, Alexis? Speak your purpose."

Her heart felt like it might explode as she stood slowly, bowing. She half expect him to kill her. The other half of her hoped he would, rather than subjecting her to the embarrassment and shame.

"I'm looking for my memories, m'lord." She whispered timidly.

The man laughed, "Memories? Oh, I do wonder who told you about those. You will not want to view them. You will regret it, I promise you."

He snapped a finger and three white orbs flew into the centre of the room. Alexis wasn't quite sure where from. She hadn't seen any magic, but then, she should have if he had summoned them even from a nearby hiding place.

She bit her lip nervously, "Why did you take them?"

The Marked looked at her in surprise, "This is new. You aren't sure you want to see them."

"You told me I didn't." Alexis shrugged, "I still live to serve you. I just... Don't understand. I can't comprehend a world in which you would take them. It is... Almost like heresy, if it were an action taken by a lowly demon."

He shook his head, "You misunderstand. I've taken your memories three times. The last two, were after you came here to find your missing memory. It doesn't seem to matter how often I do it, you always seem to find out and come for them again. Both times before, you took the memory the moment I offered it. This time you have hesitated. This time, you trust me more. I must have done something right."

Alexus felt a chill run down her spine. "What is in the first memory? What is so dangerous about it?"

"That you seek is dangerous enough." The Marked replied casually, "Disobedience is rebellion.

I cannot tolerate rebellion with the Hall of the Hells. You are not just a demon, Alexis, you are one of my Furies. You are an expression of my wrath and rage. I cannot, ever, allow you to step out of line. No infraction, no matter how small, or how great, can be tolerated.”

Alexus looked at the shining light of her world, and then snatched at one of the orbs of light. As her hand went to close around it, flames engulfed her, and the lights vanished. She felt to the ground, black flames still burning on her arm, and she looked up at the Marked. This had been another test. Maybe she’d failed. Maybe Dyys had set her on this path for the test.

She didn’t think so. The Marked hadn’t been lying to her. She might not be able to see his soul, but she knew truth when she heard it. There was something about that memory that he would never allow her to have. He was willing to kill her, to destroy her soul, rather than allow the chance that she might remember. He had stolen something from her.

Alexus glared at the flames bleeding away her lifeforce, and stumbled upright, “You are right. I am a Fury. I’m just not your Fury.”

The Marked looked at her in surprise, “Are you defying me, Alexis?”

The demon smiled at him, and snapped her fingers. The orbs reappeared as she duplicated the exact reverberation he had used earlier. A spell, but a fixed one. Simple and stupid. Locked to the exact frequency of sound. She grabbed the memory, screaming as it poured over her.

Wrodin

He walked into his quiet and damp hovel, feeling relief. It didn't last. He had hoped to come home, to collapse and be free of everything. No longer drawn into the endless tangle of the lives of these loud people. No longer drawn towards an event. Towards war. He had left war behind. It was no longer his. He was mortal.

Yet, he found someone waiting for him.

An angry, and hurting farmer. Probably one of the denser mortals he had come across. He liked Bel, he did not like Jean. Not that he could blame the man - everyone he knew had died, including the man's own father. He'd been forced to take over a farm in a world that wouldn't allow it to grow. Forced to try and become a community leader, when the community was dead.

Wrodin glared, "Get out."

Jean shook his head, "I respect you, Wrodin, but this is important. I don't know anyone else who can deal with this."

"Then no one can." Wrodin growled, "I am done with you mortals. Leave me be. Leave me to die in this hollow under the hill. Forget I ever existed. I just want peace. I want what I never had as a god. The gift that only mortals can have. So... Get out."

The farmer clenched his fists, "Bel is using magic. She's trying to heal the farm. Please. For her."

Wrodin groaned and sighed heavily, "Void. She's trying the creation spell. On her own."

"Yes."

"Then she's dead." Wrodin replied tiredly, "I am not able to counteract a creation spell, boy. Hells. The only one who can do that is either a god or a Fury. And the Fury is dead. Bel is gone. Go hide somewhere, before the valley is erased. Or stay. I'm about to raise a barrier."

Jean turned white, "You have to help her."

"I can't." Wrodin shook his head, "Only the gods can. So start praying. Maybe they'll listen."

He turned and tossed a simple spell at the entrance, causing a barrier sphere to appear around his cave. Then he walked over and fell onto his mat, and closed his eyes. He would know when Bel's spell failed. Everything from here to the capital city would be erased. There would be no survivors. For the people of Balavid, this would be like the calamity all over again.

The nation had failed.

Humanity would survive, as they always did, but it wouldn't be these people. Chaos was already starting to break out here and there. This village could even be the start of a new kingdom, if their sole surviving elder took a moment to think it over. There was no way Balavid could stop them. Not even with the princeling here. All they could do was slaughter the people. The idea would remain.

Social collapse was inevitable. Too many people were dead. Too many resources had disappeared in the blink of an eye. Even the palace stores would be getting low by now. It wouldn't be long before taxes and seizing goods started to destroy what little faith the people might have left. Then the people would cut themselves off. Remake their own homes into tribes.

He wasn't sure what had made Bel think she could pull off a creation spell. Very few mages were capable of casting a magic comprised of every single kind of uncorrupted magic that exists.

Fewer were able to put that djinn back in the bottle. He really couldn't do anything about it. All he could do was lie here and wait for that brilliant young woman to reduce herself to ashes.

Jean sat down against a wall tiredly, "It really all has gone to shit, hasn't it, Wrodin?"

The ex-god rolled his eyes, "It has been going to shit since before you were born, Jean. The current shitty environment you find yourself in is a direct consequence of the death of a Fae before humanity was even created. The resurrection of Tyr. That's when it all blew up in our faces, even if not everyone realised it at the time. That was thousands and thousands of years ago. I don't think you could comprehend how long ago it was."

Jean winced, "World must have been different back then. Dwergaz were still around. The Fae were actually part of things."

"It was interesting for me." Wrodin laughed, "The dwergaz and the Fae fought an almost endless war from the first moment they met. The Fae prize living things. The dwergaz prize creating unliving things. They didn't get along very well. There were other races. Ones you've never heard a whisper of. And the elfin. And every single one of them was at war. I thrived in that... I wish I hadn't. Maybe I would have seen what Tyr represented."

Jean looked over at him, "Regrets from a god. That's new."

"Ex-god." Wrodin said bitterly, "Apparently mortality is just one long experience of regret. I even regret the things I can't control. I don't know how you can stand it."

Jean laughed, "Stand it? Wrodin... Most people can't. They spend their lives barely coping at all. And then the gods go and declare the end of the world. I doubt very much that anyone can stand being alive much, right now."

Wrodin shrugged, "It wasn't a god. It was a human."

Jean choked, "What?"

"The calamity." Wrodin sighed, "It wasn't caused by a god. It was a choice made by human, who almost immediately regretted it. It did help save your world, but it probably wasn't necessary. I think she's still haunted by that."

"Who the fuck killed my world, Wrodin?" Jean said, standing up, "Tell me her name. Who killed everyone I care about?"

Wrodin rolled his eyes, "She also saved you from a lifetime trapped inside a corrupted magic that forces you to become obsessed with it. The magic that made the orks and killed their worlds. If she was killed, then you wouldn't be dead. You'd be a slave to a will that is stronger than your own. It isn't worth being angry at her. She actually saved you. All of your stupid worthless lives."

Jean flinched, "A name, Wrodin. I don't care what good she's done. It doesn't outweigh her actions."

"Shannon." Wrodin sighed, "High Priestess of Sarin, defender of Ozandius. The only thing standing between your world, and annihilation by the goddess of chaos, Kru."

Jean frowned, "What? How can a human stand in the way of a goddess?"

"Because she's stronger." Wrodin shrugged, "Her will is stronger than Kru's. And the goddess owes her. Neither of which Kru is particularly happy about. But it is enough to make sure that humans continue to exist. No one is all good, or all evil, Jean. No human makes no mistakes. We're living in the aftermath of what happens when someone with the power of a celestial makes a mistake. It isn't the first time in history. Blaming them won't help you. Killing them will doom you. You

need let go of that hate, or it'll kill you and everything you care about. You're mortal. Moving on is part of mortality."

The farmer didn't say anything. He was rattled.

Wrodin did regret spilling that all out over the man, without taking the time to walk him through it. Everything the man knew about the gods had gone up in smoke. Maybe that was for the better with a new pantheon moving in. Or rather, two dynasties. The one that followed Trei, and the one that followed Kru. Two immensely powerful dynasties of gods. They were more creative than his generation, and more resilient. Where he had failed, whoever his successor would be... They would succeed.

He sat up, "You came because Bel was already casting the spell, right?"

Jean shrugged, staring off into the distance.

Wrodin was cautious, but he would have expected the girl to lose control by now. Maybe a god had intervened. That was surprising. Intervening to save Dyys, yes. To save Bel? No. The woman was a nobody in the grand scheme of things. She'd never come to his attention. Never stood out.

Bel

She'd vomited so much she was dry heaving, still on hands and knees. Too weak to stand. Too weak to try and get her body under control. She was shaking, knowing her muscles might give out and face plant her into a gigantic puddle of acidic waste, but she couldn't move. She just wanted it to stop.

A soft hand touched her shoulder, reassuring her. Bel reached up weakly, but the hand was gone. She shoved herself backwards, and landed in a sitting position, gasping in lungfuls of air. She blinked, trying to focus. Knowing if she didn't start moving she'd just pass out where she was.

Bel hauled herself upright, and flicked a wrist. A doorway appeared in front of her, and she walked through it.

She coughed and swore as she found herself on her hands and knees, retching again. She pushed herself upright, struggling to breathe, and glared at the calamity stone in front of her.

She pulled out the parchment to look at the spell she hadn't understood before. It made sense to her now. It was basic, and simple. The idea was to collide all magic in one place, and before the explosion could warp into an implosion and tear apart everything at once, you took the potential energy and redirected into living magic. A magic that could seek out repair anything.

This wouldn't just kick start the healing of the farm. It would continue, so long as it had magic to pull from. It would go across the entire country, healing as it went.

Dyys hadn't just been trying to heal farms as she moved across the countryside, offering her services. Dyys had been trying to heal the entire continent.

Bel smiled and tucked the parchment away, holding out a hand. The glass jars nearby unscrewed themselves, and the element inside them floated into the air. Eight small balls floated in front of her, spinning away in a circle. She put the rest back. The dwergaz had given her enough supplies to actually make a difference. Or to destroy a kingdom.

The seemed to come to her naturally. She'd barely begun to put the framework together before it snapped into place. There was a deafening roar and the entire countryside became alive, pulsing around her like the waves at the edge of the continent. A light blinded her. Flames seemed to coil around her for a moment before disappearing. She wasn't afraid. This was her magic. It wouldn't hurt her, because it was her will that made it so. She spread her hands, coiling up all the magic roiling around her, and she knelt and touched the ground softly.

The magic immediately vanished, soaked into the starving matrix of the world.

Bel stood up, dusting her hands off, and grinned.

She'd done it.

Granted, it had taken a goddess pouring knowledge directly into her skull. All the same. She, a mute farmhand, had turned around and healed her home. A place she had called home, but didn't have to anymore. Her duty was fulfilled. She didn't have to do anything more. She could walk away, and be free.

Bel sighed and walked to the edge of the field, grabbing a handful of seed from a sack. She scattered it across the field, relieving her guilt as the plants instantly sprang to life, growing quickly.

Now she could walk away.

She moved towards the road, not bothering to look behind or to leave a note. She'd done what

she had to do. As Bel stepped onto it, she felt the difference in the ground. There was something nearby. Something wrong. It didn't belong. She began to walk towards it, towards the capital. She didn't know why, but that didn't matter. She knew it was what she was supposed to do. She didn't know how she knew, but she did.

"Not bad, mage."

Bel looked sideways blinking in surprise at the figure she didn't recognise. He was tall, with tousled black hair and empty black eyes that she had to drag her gaze away from. It had felt like the other place. The place where she'd found herself when she tried to unlock her magic. She wasn't sure what he was, but he wasn't as human as he appeared.

"So, Kru taught you. That's a good sign."

She signed at him, "Who are you? What do you want?"

"The answer is the same." He replied shrugging, "I'm a god. That means what I want is what happens, and it happens because that is who I am."

Flowery, mysterious, pointless. He apparently didn't want to tell her who he was.

"Less that I don't want to, and more that I don't want it to influence you." He replied, "I have to be careful around women. I tend to... Screw with their fates. It's taken me a while to get that one under control. I don't need anymore people having their fate tied to mine. I have a wife."

Bel giggled, hiding her mouth behind her hand.

He shrugged, "I guess it might seem humorous. Now then... What are you going to do, mage? You've cured your home, and now you're walking away from it. Where are you going to go? What are you going to do? Or more to the point, what kind of damage are you going to do with the knowledge of a god?"

Bel shrugged, "There's something this way. Something bad. I'm supposed to go there."

The man scratched his head, "Supposed to? I guess. You don't have to, though. You have a choice."

"Seems as good a plan as any." Bel signed.

He smiled at her, "Huh. What price did Kru ask for the knowledge?"

Bel winced. Of course there would be a price. "She said I was annoying her. That I was interfering."

"Ouch." He replied, "That's not a safe place to be in. She'll come to collect a favour at some point. It won't matter what it is, how horrible it is, you'll have to do what she asks. Have to. So many worse things might happen if you don't. As for where you're going... Are you sure you're up for this? You were a farmhand yesterday."

"What is it?" She asked, and he laughed, "That would be cheating. I can't tell you."

"Then fuck you." She signed angrily.

The man just laughed as he walked beside her, "Brave. That is something I can say about you without reservation. Not the first time someone has sworn at me, but it happens less now that I'm a god. Not a whole heap of people can see past the power to remake every moment of their lives to screw them since before they were born."

"Is that a threat?"

He frowned, "I guess so. But a mild one. I like you. Kru likes you too. So I guess... Unless you become a direct threat to either of us, I'll make you neutral territory. The gods will stay away. They'll let you be you. If you get in danger, someone might help. They might not. Depends how interesting you are. Which currently, is very."

Bel sighed heavily, "Why? I'm not Dyys."

"No." He laughed, "You are decidedly not. You didn't try and go to war against the god of demons. You are however, a mage. Dyys called you a natural. She was trying to downplay it. To be frank, you're a fantastic mage. A savant. You're not that skilled, yet. That will come with experience. What you are, is gifted. Add in the godly revelation to give you knowledge, and you're a force of nature... And you're only just starting out. Who knows? In a hundred years you might be as strong as Vastras, and she managed to challenge the gods themselves."

Bel slowed to a stop, looking at him in surprise, "Vastras? From Calis?"

"Yes." He grimaced at a memory, "She nearly killed me a few times. She was amazing with magic. I didn't think I'd ever see another human capable of rising to her level. Never imagined it would be a farmhand in the middle of damn nowhere. Balavid of all places. An inconsequential nation known mostly for its crops. This is where a god-tier mage was born? If you are Dyys hadn't stumbled into each other... You would have discovered magic, one day. But you wouldn't be able to control it. You and everyone else would have died. It's a dangerous thing, magic."

"Is she really dead?"

The god sighed heavily, "Yes. Dyys is dead. Her soul is on its way to hell. To suffer at the hands of her king and god. I'm sorry. There really is no sugar coating that one. The best I can say is that Kru has a vested interest in both those demons. If she has her way, Alexis will avenge her. Not much of a comfort, but there it is."

Bel rolled her hands, "You're not much help, are you?"

"I'm not supposed to be, Belladonna." He snapped, "I came to find out if I'd have to kill you before you became a threat. I haven't made up my mind yet. For now, you'll get the neutrality. You'll be able to walk around, and do what you want. For now. Power comes with a cost. Both Kru and I have seen enough of that for our eternal lifetimes. We don't need another Tyr to tear down our skies. We won't let you become that. I will rip out your heart and shatter your soul the moment you threaten the worlds. Is that clear enough?"

She swallowed nervously, wiping sweaty hands on her pants, and nodded.

He shrugged turning around. The air in front of him rippled, and he issued a final warning, "Don't be a threat, Belladonna."

Then he disappeared.

She turned back and continued down the road.

Lilibeth

Her jaw cracked as her head slammed into the ground as it suddenly sprang into being. She gasped in pain, and immediately wish she hadn't as she was coated in her own vomit, falling down on top of her. Conveniently.

She pushed herself onto her knees, rubbing her jaw, about to scream at whatever god had decided to finally remember she was in the damned Void, except she wasn't. She was lying on a road. She recognised it. This was the road to Fugan. It had been a while since she'd patrolled here, but she knew it well enough.

Her ankle was still shattered, and it felt like her jaw was sprained now, as well, but she was back in the living world. She didn't know if she was alive, or this was just a vision. It didn't matter much, either way. She was naked, on a road, and something very angry was moving towards her at quite a speed.

She dove between the legs at the last second, as tusks tore into the dirt road, pummelling it away like it wasn't there. She grabbed onto the hairs on its sweaty back and hauled herself upwards. It roared and tried to buck her, but she was determined. She scrabbled as gigantic hands slammed ineptly against her, trying to find and grab her. Then she locked her arms around its neck, trying to pull tight.

The creature grabbed her broken ankle, causing a flash of light. She found herself flying through the air and into an embankment. She hit it hard enough to leave an impression in the dirt. Hard enough to crack half her ribs. She wheezed weakly, glaring at the monster and wished she still had her short sword. It wouldn't be much against a creature like this, but it'd be something.

It roared and barrelled towards her again. She dragged herself upright. She wouldn't have more than a moment to grab the horn and haul herself out of the way. If she screwed up, she'd be impaled.

The creature screamed and fell face-first into the dirt.

Lilibeth blinked in surprise, and then the warrior that had severed the creature's ankle was beside it, and the throat was slit. The warrior stepped backwards, flicking their sword and sheathing it. No. Not a warrior. The sword was rusted. The clothes were wrong. A loose-fitting white shirt. Pants designed for field work, stained by years of mud.

Her jaw dropped open, "You? Holy shit."

The woman turned towards her in surprise and signed towards the creature. Lilibeth shrugged, "No idea what it is, or where it came from. But fuck me. You're here."

The brunette raised an eyebrow and signed towards her. She swallowed nervously, "Me? Ah. Praetor Lilibeth, Second Legion."

The woman nodded and indicated her again.

Lilibeth frowned, and then looked down at herself. And remembered she'd appeared naked.

She instantly dropped into a crouch, covering herself, "I don't really know. I think one of the gods thought this would be hilarious."

The woman rolled her eyes, and kicked the dead creature, sniffing.

Lilibeth could feel it. It wasn't just a bad smell. Something else was rolling off the monster. "I think it's called the Fel. A kind of corrupted magic."

The woman glared over at her and drew her sword.

The praetor rolled her eyes, “I didn’t fucking do it! Hells, I was dead until a minute ago. I died fighting a Wachterin.”

The woman stared at her in shock, looking at her as if she actually understood. She sheathed her sword slowly, and pulled her shirt off, revealing a small tight white bra. She offered the shirt.

The praetor took it gratefully, buttoning it quickly and efficiently as she stood up. “So I guess you’re not deaf. So... Mute?”

The woman nodded, and looked back to the dead thing.

Lilibeth crouched in front of it, looking at the tusks and the squished snout, “I think... This is an ork.”

The woman nodded as if that made sense to her. It didn’t make any sense to Lilibeth. She knew there were orks. Kru had an encampment of them at Ozandia, the capital of Ozandius. There shouldn’t be a rogue one out here. Unless she’d been dead for months, they would have been spotted. Creatures like this tended to stand out, especially on one of the main roads like this. A road that refugees would have been travelling.

She looked at the road again. She hadn’t had time to notice it before. The way the soil was flattened. A military unit had marched through here. A human one. “Damn it, Aurili.”

The woman raised an eyebrow, and Lilibeth frowned, “What do I call you?”

The woman rolled her eyes and drew in the dirt.

“Bell?”

She nodded.

“Well, Bel.” Lilibeth sighed, “Praetor Aurili, against my instructions, came through here. I guess she was coming to find how the prince died.”

Bel shook her head, and tapped her chest.

“Aurili was coming to see you?”

The woman ground her teeth and wrote in the dirt, “Prince saved.”

Lilibeth’s heart skipped a beat, “Of course you saved him.”

“How do you know me?” The woman wrote quickly.

She winced, “Eh... That’s a difficult one to explain... What colour are my eyes?”

“Pink.”

She breathed a sigh of relief, “So I’m still hers. That’s nice to know.”

Lilibeth reached up to her neck, but the necklace was gone. Maybe that had been the cost of her resurrection. She didn’t have a way to know. Maybe she came back because this woman was nearby. “I’m... A prophet. Of Meria. Before I came here, with the prince, I saw you. In a vision. I saw the prince saved by a demon. Then I saw you, talking to me. A wizard told me the sign you said meant... I’ll see you soon.”

The woman stood up, brushing off her hands. As if that made perfect sense to her. As if gods interacting with mortals wasn’t the thing of legends. As if demons weren’t incredibly rare nightmares that had no business saving princes.

The praetor sighed, “So which way were you going?”

The woman pointed.

“Fugan.” She nodded, “Do you mind if I go with you? I don’t know where the prince is, but I don’t think I’ll get very far like this.”

The woman laughed silently, covering her mouth, and nodded.

Alexus

She was standing beside the Marked, looking down at the assembled army proudly. “Four hundred and seven, Furies, m’lord.”

He just grunted, “It might be enough. Maybe. Enough to get us in the doors to Hell, anyway.”

She looked at him, unable to stop herself beaming, “Hero, you’ve scourged the Evening Realms. You were killed, and damned to hell. You escaped from the Tenth Circle. We are all with you. We will eject this mage who was created a realm of pure torture. You will rule it, and we will be your army. They don’t have a chance. Not against you, not against us.”

Hero just grunted. He was always like this. Dour. Pessimistic.

One of the other generals stepped up, saluting. Hero nodded at her. Dyys grinned toothily, “The weapon is ready, m’lord.”

Hero blinked in surprise, “What is she talking about, Alexis?”

She swallowed nervously, “I had her... Making a sword.”

He glared at her, “What sword?”

Alexus bit her lip, and Dyys put a hand on his shoulder, “Calm down, Hero. I would’ve done it anyway. I would have kept it for myself, rather than give it you, but Alexis wanted you to have it. So show a little leniency.”

The warlord rolled his eyes, “Fuck. Show it to me.”

Dyys signalled a nearby Fury, who handed her a sword in a sheath. She offered it towards him. Hero drew it, and Alexis saw his eyes light up. He was enjoying it, even if he was about to get angry at her.

“The hilt is all I could really recover after what Lady Luna did.” Dyys began, “The blade however, comes from an ancient stone that fell from the skies. Cursed stone, I should add. It bled corrupted magic. Like the Fel. Might even have been one of the ancient sources of Fel. Anyways, without breaking the curse, I forged it into a blade. Trapped the cursed inside. Anyone cut by that blade will die. No matter what. Only direct divine intervention could save them.”

He hefted it slowly, “Runes.”

“A binding spell for the curse one side, on the other, a banishing spell. It’s linked to hell. Anyone who calls it home will get evicted when cut. So you evict them to the mortal plane, where they’re poisoned, and die.”

Hero smiled appreciatively, “It’s the perfect weight. Perfect length. This sword is absolutely fantastic, Dyys.”

Dyys grinned at him, and Hero glared, “Fuck with me again, go into my past again, and I’ll use it on you.”

The general bowed her head, “Apologies, m’lord.”

He waved her away.

Alexus glared at him, “That wasn’t kind.”

“I’m not kind, Alexis.” Hero snapped, “I’m dead, and I’m too angry to die. That doesn’t mean I will let you all go around poking in my past. This is my new life. I don’t want you to know about me.”

She put a hand on her hip, "I share your bed. I better know about you."

"You won't soon." Hero glared at her, "In fact, after this battle is done... You won't remember my name. And you won't remember this conversation either."

She went to say something, but he stabbed his hand into her face. She screamed as he grabbed onto her eye.

She collapsed to the ground, barely seeing him tossing a white ball before she blacked out.

Alexus fell backwards in shock, looking up at the Marked.

No, Hero. A human who had died, and escaped hell.

A mass murderer. Her lover.

He was no god.

He laughed at her, "And you think I'll let you keep that memory, Alexis? We've done this before. Give up."

She screamed in agony, helpless as he grabbed her eye again. Hero smiled at her, "Too bad. You were decent in bed."

Alexus fell forward, coughing flecks of blood onto the ground. Just flecks.

Yet, her world was spinning.

She looked up slowly, eyes watering from the pain, at the Faen goddess standing over her. Kru sighed, "I told you'd regret it. But now, that memory is yours. He can never take it from you."

Kru crouched, "So... Tell me. Who is he? Really? The Marked. I can't look inside hell clearly. He's hidden it. Who is he?"

Alexus punched the ground angrily, "Hero. His name is Hero."

Kru stood up, "Ash. Wow. That bastard is still alive. After what Luna did to him."

"He's not." Alexis stood up, shaking with rage, "He escaped hell, and then came back and conquered it. He used us. He turned the Furies into his weapon that conquered the world for him. There's only a dozen Furies alive, did you know that? Before we invaded there were hundreds. He butchered us, just to turn around and take our memories away. Nalsin. Dyys was right. He lied about every single thing. I screwed him. Hells."

Kru laughed, "Wait, what?"

Alexus blushed, "Shut up. I'm dealing with things."

"And I'm a goddess." Kru snapped, "Show some respect."

Alexus nodded glumly, looking at the ground, "I can't bring Dyys' soul back to him... Can't you resurrect her?"

"Not without dooming the entire 'verse." Kru laughed, "She's supposed to be dead. Her journey is over, Alexis. Let it be. She's home. Back to the world that you all came from. Isn't that enough? You have to fight Hero. You know that. I know you feel like you need Dyys, but would that really be fair right now? She's done her bit. Even touched the divine."

Alexus rolled her eyes, "Oh. She's in paradise, isn't she?"

"Yeah." Kru smiled sadly, "You don't want to drag her from the perfect world, back to deal with this voiden one. She's happy."

Alexus nodded, tears forming in her eyes. She fell beside the body of her friend again, “I miss you, Dyys. I’m so sorry... I’m sorry I didn’t remember. I’m sorry wasn’t there for you. I’m... Damn it.”

“How are you going to stop him?” Kru asked, “Maybe a promise to do that would be worth more than an apology. Make her death worth it.”

Alexus glared at the goddess, but she was gone.

She sighed.

Then she stood up and stepped over to the tree, and heaved. There was a groaning sound as her magic kept the dead tree intact, and the roots pulled. She reached down into them, coaxing them back into life.

The soil in front of the tree collapsed, dragging Dyys’ corpse down into it.

She nodded slowly. She hadn’t really done enough to resurrect the tree or the soil, not for long. If she survived, she would come back here, and make sure that every single traveller who ever passed would stop and stare in awe. That they would know that this was where a true hero had died. Not the charlatan who had created the title. The one he had killed for daring to question him. Daring to know who he really was.

And now...

Now she was going to go murder the man she called her god.

Wrodin

“Bloody hell.” He said slowly as he stood in front of his hovel, “She actually did it. Jean, you need to take a look at this.”

The farmer emerged cautiously, and then fell to his knees. “The farm. . .”

Wrodin shook his head, “I don’t know how, but Bel did it. She healed it. You’ve got a crop to harvest.”

“That’s. . . Insane.” Jean said, wiping tears from his eyes.

Wrodin turned around and walked inside. He’d done his part. Now Jean could go do his and leave him the hell alone.

He sat down and lit a fire with a small burst of magic.

It immediately went out.

He blinked in surprise and relit it.

It blew out.

He knew a massive discharge of magic had just happened, but this shouldn’t be happening. He looked around the hovel slowly, but he was alone. He glared at the fireplace, and tried again. It immediately blew out.

He threw up his hands, “Haven’t you got better things to do than screw with me?”

“Yes.” A voice whispered in his ear, sending a terrified chill down it, “I didn’t save you, Wrodin, just so that you could away. I chose you. As my champion. So yes, I would much rather not be screwing with you, but you need to be reminded of your place. So thank you, for wasting my time.”

He swallowed nervously, “Kao.”

Arms that weren’t there went around his shoulders, and he felt a cold breath on his cheek, “Asshole.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Well, I was going to get you to save Lilibeth, but you screwed that up. So she got saved by Kru’s warrior instead. So this time, I’m going to port you directly to the capital. You’ll Alfiti there. And the dickhead prince. You are to guide them, protect them, and maybe die for them. When Lilibeth and Bel turn up, you’re going to convince them to help out.”

Wrodin cringed, “Bel is Kru’s warrior?”

“For now.” Kao replied with a tone that implied that she barely even believed that Bel was serving her heir at all. And that if Wrodin didn’t change the circumstance that he’d end up in her sights. Amazing what a tone of voice could imply. Especially when that voice wasn’t attached to a body, but was attached to a goddess of chaos that was well known for lashing out in completely disproportionate ways.

He didn’t have a chance to voice his acceptance. That was taken for granted. After all, Kao didn’t ask. She was the first god. The mother of all gods, in a literal sense, and a metaphorical sense. He’d been so overjoyed to hear she’d retired and given up her divinity. He’d also completely forgotten that she was as timeless as she was formless. Of course she only retired once she’d done what she wanted to.

His knees hit stone slab, and he winced as his hands slapped the ground. He stood up, shaking

his stinging hands, and paused as he saw legionnaires drawing swords and advancing towards him. He held up his hands, "Whoa there. I'm not an enemy. Just a mage looking for Alfiti."

One of the legionnaires paused, and signalled the others to hold their ground, "If he moves, kill him. If he speaks again, kill him."

He smiled his thanks at her, but didn't thank her. He couldn't. He knew they'd follow their orders to the letter, and he'd rather not get disembowelled whilst owing Kru a favour. That seemed a way to guarantee an eternity of torture, followed by a resurrection on the spot.

The woman glared, and turned away, walking up a series of steps. He had a chance to look around him, and see where Kru had deposited him. From what he could tell, he was in a training yard. Nearby was a pit of mud, with a few wooden targets for combat practice, and a few bales of hay studded with arrows. It looked like the legionnaire who was in charge had gone into some kind of barracks that seemed attached to a palace. So this was what Fugan looked like. At least a part of it.

It wasn't coated in ash, like the rest of the country side. That was something.

"Who... Wrodin!?"

He smiled up as Alfiti jumped over a banister, "What in the gods are you doing here?"

He glanced over at the legionnaire who sighed, "You may speak, intruder."

"I was sent." Wrodin sighed, "Apparently a goddess thought my presence here was absolutely essential. To protect you, and a prince that she doesn't seem to think much of."

Alfiti laughed, "Really. Not surprising... But you didn't name the god. Do I want to know?"

"No." He shook his head with a grin, "No, you do not."

The legionnaire snorted derisively, "Unfortunately we must know all the same. I am charged with the prince's safekeeping. I will not have some stranger, no matter how powerful a mage they may be, protecting my prince without the name of the one who controls them."

Wrodin sighed heavily, "Alfiti, do you want to block your ears?"

The elf shrugged, "I'll find out anyway. This Praetor doesn't know how to keep her thoughts to her self."

The woman glared at her, and then at him. He got the feeling he did not want to be glared at her long term, and that it would be highly hazardous to his health if it were to continue for much longer. "Kao."

Alfiti facepalmed, "Eiden mos takken da ran so fere!"

The Praetor scratched her head, "Isn't she dead?"

Alfiti glared over at her, "Eiden. She's timeless, you idiot. Which means this is her little surprise. And that Kru is going to be upset. And hate you. And we're going to have two gods, who are both the god of chaos, and one of the most powerful gods ever born, at each other's throats. Takken. Takken das mere."

The Praetor blinked once or twice, and then he saw her calm dissolve like snow on a summer's morning. She began chewing on one of her fists, glaring at him, "Fuck. Couldn't your warning have been just a tiny bit more explicit? Like, 'if I tell you this, you'll want to go fucking commit fucking suicide'?"

Wrodin rolled his eyes, “Don’t be so dramatic. The prince is alive, isn’t he? I’m just here to help.”

Alfiti clenched her fists, “What else in this pile of steaming ash have you got for us?”

“Two more are coming our way. We may have to convince them to help us, or they might do it on their own.” He said slowly, “One is a farmhand I know. You met her, Alfiti. Bel. She’s... A natural at magic. I have no clue how, but she recently managed to cast creation magic. If she did it here... Farmland gets healed. People’s hearts get healed. It might calm the city.”

The praetor nodded slowly, “That’s... Useful. Who is the other?”

“All I have is a name.” He shrugged, “Lilibeth, whoever that is.”

The praetor froze as if he had gut punched her, and Alfiti rubbed her temples, “Gods. Don’t your thoughts ever shut up?”

He looked from one to the other, “Guess you know the name. Is she going to be a problem?”

“No.” The praetor croaked, wiping a tear from one eye. Something he’d never expected to see the brutalistic woman do. “Lilibeth is the other Praetor of my legion. She’s my partner... She died, saving the prince.”

Wrodin laughed, “Yeah. I died too. Twice. Once as a god, once as a mortal. The others didn’t really let it take.”

Alfiti shrugged beside her, “Yeah, me too. Not as a god, obviously.”

The praetor looked at both of them incredulously, “You’re undead?”

“No.” Alfiti said with disgust, “That would be gross. Gods resurrected us. Which means a full and perfect resurrection. We’re living, just like you.”

The praetor laughed weakly, “Fuck. Dealing with the gods is on another level, isn’t it?”

“We’re pawns.” Wrodin yawned, “And it looks like a play is coming to us. Kao, Kru... Someone else. Something to do with demonkind. So I guess the Marked One, though I could never really work out if he was a god or not. May as well be with the power he has at his beck and call.”

Alfiti’s spear appeared in her hand, “If the Marked is invading...”

“No signs of that, yet.” Wrodin grinned, “Just that his rule isn’t as tight as he expected it to be. A demon defied him. She’s dead. A hunter is dragging her soul back to hell.”

The praetor shook her head, “You two speak like this is all common.”

Alfiti shrugged, “I’m the daughter of a Shrine Guardian. Dealing with divine problems is sorta commonplace. I was at the fall of Eldrasa. Serving a newborn goddess is a bit weird, but no weirder than watching Kao make out with a Protoanimarum.”

The praetor blinked, “Do I want to know what that is?”

“One of the First People.” Wrodin interjected, “And well, this is common for me, praetor. I am Wrodin. The Wrodin. I may be mortal now, and nought but a mage, but I was a god once. I was... Deposed. For being stupid.”

“For destroying Eldrasa.” Alfiti glared at him.

He nodded, “That too.”

The praetor breathed in deeply, and counted, and then breathed out again. “So... I have an ex-Guardian of the Shrine, and an ex-god. And maybe an ex-alive praetor on the way. Whatever

shitstorm the gods believe is coming must be absolutely monumental.”

Wrodin nodded grimly, “I have only seen gods gather champions like this before war. Not just battle. War on a scale that humanity has rarely witnessed. Cities wiped out in a single blow. Millions killed before they even have time to realise they are in danger. When people like us fight, the collateral damage is overwhelming.”

“Like Calis.” The praetor said bitterly.

Alfiti nodded slowly, “Yeah. I don’t like the feeling that this is connected to Calis, somehow. You know any better, Wrodin?”

“It might be.” He said cautiously, “I don’t see how. More likely, it’ll be connected to Ozandia, or to Kru. The calamity was a direct side-effect of Kru’s awakening. She became corrupted with the Fel, and attacked. A human summoned the calamity to stop her. It only partly worked.”

The praetor shook her head, “Neither of you are doing anything like that.”

Wrodin glared at her, “Losing your world is better than it being infected with the Fel.”

“He’s not joking.” Alfiti said reservedly, “You... Don’t want touch it. Just trust me, please.”

The praetor blinked in surprise, “You were infected?”

“Yes.” Alfiti said without elaborating. The praetor waited for her to go on, but she didn’t. Glaring didn’t seem to do the trick either. Eventually she relented, “Corrupted magic, yes? Can we expect that here?”

“I’ve seen corruption in and around the focal points of the calamity.” Wrodin said slowly, “I don’t believe that was supposed to happen. I don’t know for certain. I’m mortal. But I do know that there is someone acting behind the Fel, and I thought they were several thousand years dead.”

Alfiti sighed heavily, “Summer and Alphege won’t tell me. They must have their reasons for keeping it quiet, Wrodin.”

“Of course they do.” He laughed, “It’s Summer’s sister. The one she executed.”

Alfiti flinched, “Say what?”

“Tyr. You remember him, right?”

Alfiti nodded slowly, “Bastard who created Trei. By manipulating thousands of years of history.”

“He was a Fae.” Wrodin nodded, “A Fae who died. His wife tried to resurrect him, not knowing about the Faen reincarnation cycle. So he got stuck outside of time. His solution to that was to become a god. And to do that, he tried to kill all the gods. Trei stopped him at Calis. Sarin did briefly resurrect him, but he was killed.”

The praetor sighed heavily, “So this might be connected to Calis, then.”

“Maybe.” Wrodin shrugged, “The wife who resurrected Tyr, was punished. To make an example that would be remembered for all eternity. So that the Fae would never again do anything nearly as stupid. It worked. No Fae has been resurrected since. She didn’t really deserve it, but she got it. She was sent to hell for the rest of her eternal reincarnating life. Tortured from birth. For all time. Every lifetime.”

The praetor swallowed, “Fuck me.”

Alfiti looked sideways at her like she was about to make a remark, but thought better of it. Wrodin continued, “That woman’s name was Ausosa. She made up part of the Triumvirate of the

Fae. Three rulers. Summer, the Queen, and most powerful. Her power comes from the sun. Luna, the Guardian of the Shrine, the most violent. Her power comes from the moon. Ausosa, the jailer, and most unpredictable. Her power comes from the dawn, the balance between Summer and Luna.”

The praetor grunted, “So they punished her by making her an eternal prisoner. Did she make hell?”

“Yes and no.” Wrodin shrugged, “She taught a mortal, a mage by the name of Lore of the Rock, how to create it. She was the architect, but the mage created it, and governed it. The Fae are... Lazy. They don’t lift a finger if they don’t have to.”

The praetor nodded slowly, “So. This goddess or Fae, or both... She was punished with an eternity in hell. How come her name has come up?”

“The unknown thing controlling the Fel claims to be her.” Wrodin shivered. “Gods help us if it is. If they can. Hell has been destroying souls and storing their energy for generations upon generations. We’ve been assuming that power goes to the Marked, which is not an inconsiderable threat, but if he works for, or has a deal with her, then we’re all screwed. Of course, it’s also just as likely she’s escaped, or some mid-level freak is trying to scare everyone by using the name. If she is alive, then Ausosa has managed to stay in hiding for millennia. That seems... Unlikely.”

The praetor laughed, “But, with how flexible death is around gods, you have to treat it as a real threat.”

He nodded, “Pretty much. That being said, I don’t see a huge threat from hell, not right now. So I don’t really know why the gods are gathering champions. Maybe Kru and Kao are about to have a pissing contest.”

Alfiti grinned, “You know I can beat you now, right? And that I’m Kru’s?”

“Yes.” He shrugged, “I didn’t even want to be here, Alfiti.”

The praetor sighed, “We should prepare our defences, and send scouts to spot and escort the two on the road.”

Wrodin grinned at her, “Ah yes. Lilibeth. Now there’s someone I’m looking forward to meeting. Someone who can get you in as much as a tizzy as dealing with gods must be interesting.”

The praetor’s sword immediately touch his throat, and he held up his hands, “Just teasing.”

“I took a vow of celibacy to serve you.” She spat, “Did you know that? I’m one of your sworn handmaidens. But it turns out you’re not even a god anymore.”

Wrodin pushed the blade aside delicately, “If I’m not, where do you think the power goes?”

The praetor blinked slowly, “What? I... What?”

“I have an heir, praetor.” He explained slowly, “Your soul is now theirs. And no, you don’t get a choice in it. No second chances. No take backs. You swore a vow, and it will be kept. She’s even less forgiving than I am.”

Alfiti frowned, “How do you know who it is? You wouldn’t have chosen them before you became mortal.”

Wrodin sighed, “Just another teasing gift from Kao. An insight.”

Bel

She paused, stretching, and looked at the deserted and burned out town. This was as good a place as any. The sun was getting low in the sky. She looked to her new companion.

A naked soldier drops out of the sky right next a magically corrupted ork. She wasn't entirely sure what it meant, but she wasn't stupid enough to ignore it. It meant something. The gods were involved. This was more of a shout than the whispers they were more well known for.

It was obvious from the way the woman walked that she was a soldier. She claimed to be a praetor. It seemed reasonable. Somebody had to lead those soldiers into the ruins, and with a prince, it would have been someone important. So someone important would have died.

The gods always like their warriors. Maybe one of them had saved the woman... She also claimed to be a prophet. Bel had certainly never seen pink eyes like those before. Maybe she was, maybe she wasn't.

She gestured at the ruins of the town, and the woman nodded, holding the shirt down to cover her butt, "Seems as good as any."

Bel nodded, and mimed eating.

"You're going to go look for food?"

She nodded and waved, heading out into the town. She wasn't sure how, but she knew there was something close by. She assumed the soldier would get a camp together somewhere. There should be enough tinder and charcoal lying around in this burnt out ruin to a fire going. Maybe enough to build a shelter.

She wasn't concerned that the soldier would die. She might be nearly naked and unarmed, and injured... But she'd held her own against an ork like that. If a bandit tried to take her... Bel would pity them.

"Lilibeth's cute, isn't she?"

Bel rolled her eyes as she saw the Faen goddess leaning against a building. Then continued on her hunt. She could feel it. Close, now.

The Fae pranced over to her, "No. You're not interested in her. Disappointing. That would have been fun. But I guess Lilibeth only has eyes for Aurili. Just like you only have eyes for two dead people."

Bel paused, glaring sideways.

Kru shrugged at her, "Izak, for one. Dyys, for the other. You could have had something with her, if you were willing to entertain it."

Bel signed, "She was my friend."

Kru just laughed, "You think a demon gives something like that bracelet to just anyone? It's a piece of her soul. She already gave you her heart, Bel. Almost literally."

She froze, glancing at the bracelet on her wrist, "What?"

The Fae grinned at her, "That's a piece of her soul. That's how the spell works. You break the soul, and nature tries to put it back together. Well, when the soul is still in the realm."

Bel glared at her, "When were you going to tell me? That I can save her?"

"She's in paradise." Kru sighed, "She's already moved on. It's just a trinket. Don't break it."

Bel bit her lip nervously, and glared at the goddess. She considered it, and then she grinned, “You liar.”

Kru groaned, “Oh, don’t screw things up again. Please.”

“I won’t.” Bel said, “For now. I will save her, though.”

The Fae glared at her, “Voiden ash. You are the most infuriating mortal I know of. Seriously. You waltz around twisting and breaking the timelines like they didn’t even exist in the first place. Millions of futures vanish every time you do a damned thing. And I can’t even kill you. Because that’s even worse.”

Bel grinned broadly and signed, “So you’re annoyed you can’t control me?”

The Fae glared at her, the red flecks in her eyes shining brighter, “I wouldn’t push me, mortal. Because you are, mortal. I need you for the convenience. But if I have to kill you and spend a thousand years cleaning up the mess... I can do that to.”

Bel shrugged, smiling at her.

The goddess ground her fangs, her wings shimmering, “Oh screw you, Bel.”

Then she disappeared.

Bel spun around, a hand snatching at the burned soil. The snake hissed as she held it in by the neck easily. This was what she’d felt. The neck broke easily, and she tied the tail to her belt, eyes looking around furtively.

She didn’t have a death wish. Annoying Kru was a bad idea. She was a goddess, and didn’t seem to be a particularly patient one, but it was so easy. Easy to tease and poke. It was so much fun to see Kru getting all flustered... Even if it probably meant the goddess would go unleash her fury somewhere.

That made Bel feel a touch of guilt.

There was every chance that people were actually dying because she was irritating an incredibly powerful entity. She needed to stop seeing Kru as a person, and more as a force of nature. That might make it easier.

She tied the fifth snake to her belt and began walking towards the smoke she could see rising, smiling slowly. She felt at peace.

She wasn’t sure why she was heading to the capital, but it seemed like she was doing the right thing. Following the path Kru was trying to make her, even if the goddess seemed to getting annoyed that she couldn’t.

Bel considered that. Why couldn’t she? The goddess could manipulate people, places, and times. Was another god trying to protect Bel from her? Was she really neutral ground, like the other god had suggested?

Bel blinked in surprise as she saw someone else sitting at the fireplace, across from the soldier, who now had pants.

She waved as she approached them.

Lilibeth

The soldier looked at the farmhand approaching with a bundle of snakes dragging behind her, and smiled weakly, “This is, Bel.”

The woman on the other side of the flames smiled, standing to shake her hand, “I know. It is a pleasure to meet you, Belladonna.”

The woman recoiled instantly, hand going to her sword. Lilibeth shot in between the two of them, “Calm. Please.”

Bel sneered and gestured, and the woman nodded, “You’re right. I am a goddess. I guess we’re the only ones who call you Belladonna these days, aren’t we? Call it... A term of endearment.”

Lilibeth breathed out slowly, “She’s just here to talk. Please?”

Bel looked at her and then rolled her eyes. She could guess the sign. “Fine.”

She sat back down by the fire as the farmhand began to skin the food she’d found. “This is Meria’el. My goddess. I’ve sworn to follow her all of my days, but meeting her... This is amazing. And rare.”

Bel didn’t say anything, just looking angry.

“I’m afraid I’m the third god she’s met in a small space of time.” Meria smiled, and shrugged, causing the silver bells in her golden hair to jangle, “I’m really not here for you, Belladonna. Even if you weren’t off limits, I came to see Lilibeth. She’s been through a fair bit, recently. Dying, and all.”

Bel glanced up, and Meria smiled sadly, “Yes. She really died. She... Deserves an explanation of her return. She wasn’t given one.”

Lilibeth swallowed nervously, “I was naked. On the road. I went from falling in the Void to face planting in front of a corrupted ork.”

“Yes.” Meria sighed, “I’m afraid... I had nothing to do with your resurrection. At all. I was campaigning to bring you home. To my paradise. To let you be free of what’s coming. Unfortunately, someone more powerful disagreed. She... She wants you to be her champion.”

Lilibeth looked down, feeling a weight on her shoulders. “I’m your prophet. I have served my every action to fulfil your philosophy. The will to live is everything.”

“It’s Kao.” Meria shrugged, “She likes you. If she didn’t have a girlfriend, I’d almost say she was infatuated with you. She’s willing to let you come to my paradise, and remain my prophet. In exchange, you have to be her champion. Her hero.”

Lilibeth wished she had her sword. The pants and underwear had been a welcome relief, but she still felt naked without a weapon. Without a gladius by her hip, she was only half-dressed.

Being pressured by a god into becoming a warrior in some upcoming crisis wasn’t making her feel particularly in control, or calm. She’d already died once. Killed by just a mechanism in a cave.

Now she was going to be caught up in some war of the gods.

Meria shook her head, “Not like that, little Lil. You’re central, but this isn’t a war. There isn’t gods fighting. This is just survival.”

Lilibeth looked up in surprise, “No one has called me that since my childhood.”

Meria smiled, “I’ve watched over you since before you were born. You always going to be my prophet. Just like you were always going to die in a cave, giving the prince a chance to meet the

real hero of this tale. The demon. She was Bel's friend."

Lilibeth looked over at the farmhand, and she almost missed it. The farmhand brushed it away so quickly she almost didn't notice the single tear on her face. The blood from the snakes was smeared there, from irritated brushes of a hand... But there had been a tear.

"Dyys is... Fantastic." Meria grinned, "A mover. A shaker. Someone willing to pay any price to do what is right. There's competition for her soul. Everyone wants to offer her paradise... But she belongs to Trei. Which is weird. Because he doesn't like that gods can own souls."

Bel looked up with frustration, and signed, still holding her sword.

Meria sighed, "You're right. I can tell you some of the events that are about to take place, and your place in them. Simply put, Balavid is about to play host. They don't have much of a choice. A peace treaty, between the old gods, Trei and Kru. That's where all this is headed. So we all get to drag our champions along. Tempers will flare. There'll be one or two assassination attempts. Normal things like that."

Lilibeth frowned, "I need to be your champion then, not Kao's."

"No, you need to be Kao's." Meria corrected her, "Kao is the head of the old order. My order. She represents all the old gods. The head of the new pantheon... That isn't decided yet. Kru, or Trei. This peace treaty is a step towards that decision without the 'verse ended up as a bunch of tangled fibres drifting in the Void."

Bel stood up, signing as she dropped her sword.

Meria frowned, "What about Dyys? She's... His chosen champion. The Marked. The god of hell that none of us has ever really met. Except, she disobeyed him. Ran away. Couldn't really have had worse timing. I guess he'll bring Alexis, now. If she doesn't try and kill him."

Lilibeth looked on curiously as Bel held out her wrist, tapping a bracelet around her wrist. It was some kind of red thread, wrapped into a simple knot. Meria's eyes widened in surprise, "Oh, wow. I'm sorry Belladonna. I didn't realise that was between you."

The praetor stifled a giggle as the farmhand went bright red in embarrassment and frantically issued a series of signs. Meria did laugh. "I'm not about to judge. A demon and a human? I don't see anything wrong, there. You're both just trying to make your way in the world."

Bel threw up her hands in frustration.

Lilibeth winced, "Wait, Meria. Bel... Did you know that was a promise knot?"

The farmhand sat down next to the fire, skewering a snake to cook it, and shook her head silently. It was the quiet shake of a head of someone who didn't know how to handle it. That were hurting.

The goddess sat down slowly, "Dyys never told you she was interested?"

Bel shook her head again.

"Screw that." Meria muttered angrily, "Kru apparently has some sort of grand plan to do with the Hall of Hells. She'll be angry... But I can show you how to bring her back. That bracelet is a promise, and the promise can be fulfilled. Should be."

Lilibeth winced, "That'll make Kru target us, right?"

"Not you." Meria smiled, "You'll be Kao's champion. Politics will protect you, at least until the treaty is signed, or screwed."

The praetor moved next to the farmhand. She didn't know her at all. But she did know what she regretted when she died. The thing that had kept going around in her head, over and over, as she fell through the Void. The thought that tortured every part of her mind. "Bel... Bring her back."

The woman raised an eyebrow at her in surprise.

Lilibeth sighed, "I'm a soldier. I have lead my people. I lead them to their deaths. I regretted being unable to protect the prince when I died, the prince that your friend saved. But that's not what I cared about. There's only one thought on my mind, now. I have my second life. The gods have purpose for me... But myself, all I want is to see Aurili again. I don't know if I'll say anything. She knows, of course... But she swore an oath of celibacy, and an oath of fealty to the god of war. She and I can never be... And that thought is what consumed me when I died. Don't be me. Ask yourself what would happen. Just... See if it is worth it. Don't regret it."

Bel giggled, and signed.

Meria translated, "Apparently, this will piss off Kru."

Lilibeth raised an eyebrow, "So why are you laughing?"

Bel made the same signs, and then put a hand on her wrist, and smiled at Meria.

Alexus

She yanked on the ground, creating a hovel, and fell into it tiredly. She'd been running all day. She'd make it to the sea tomorrow at this pace, though she wasn't sure if she'd be capable of fighting at that kind of speed. She was pushing herself, because she couldn't afford to stop.

She snapped her fingers, lighting a fire next to herself and rolled over, wrapping her arms around each other. She stared into the flames as the silent tears began to roll down her face. Her mind was cruel. Replaying her memories of Dyys, over and over. Chasing each other over the Cliffs of Abaddon. Hunting bats across the fire lakes of Maphaesto.

Picnic lunches from the mortal world, stolen by Dyys in her spare time. Now she'd actually been here, she had no idea how Dyys had pulled those off. The amount of magic she must have stored to be able to port to three different nations and then back home again must have been immense.

She missed her, desperately.

She didn't feel whole anymore. She hadn't just watched another Fury die. In her memory, from before Hero had made her forget, even then she'd befriended Dyys. She was her commander, and the lover of their leader, but Dyys could still get away with whatever she wanted. Maybe she'd been a doting older sister.

She didn't even know if they were sisters, or if that was just another one of Hero's lies.

Bastard.

He'd taken everything she ever cared about and smeared it with shit. Then forced her to say she loved it. He had ruined her world. Ruined her. Abused her. She had been in love with him, and he took her memory of it when it was no longer convenient. She could never forgive him for that.

She wiped her eyes, and sighed heavily, trying to untangle the emotions of the last few days. Seeing Dyys in the ruins had hurt, because she hated her. Because she saw what was on the wrist of that stupid mortal woman who was with her. Maybe she wasn't stupid. She'd been stronger than Alexis expected.

"Abaddon." She cursed as she realised. She was jealous. That's why she disliked the mortal so much. Dyys had never given her a promise knot. Despite all the games, and what she'd thought was flirting... Dyys had just seen her as a sister. Alexis was just now realising she didn't think of Dyys as a sister. She wanted more than that. She was just too terrified to say it. Because, at heart, she was a coward.

Alexis was supposed to be the fearless hunter who fights onwards forever... But Dyys was the one who had worked out that Hero was a liar. It might not have been that way every time, but Alexis should have known it. Should have tried... Something. Anything. She should have known that Hero was a stupid freaking mortal soul.

But instead, she'd spent generations helping him accumulate power to the point where he might as well be a god. His soul might not be eternal. Without constant care, it'd fall apart. She knew that from experience. It was one of the torture methods that Dyys had invented. When a mortal is forgotten, their soul begins to degrade. Except... Would it ever degrade, for Hero? His name was an idea to humanity.

Alexis thumped the ground with a fist.

None of this mattered.

None of it.

Dyys was dead and buried. The mortal was out of her reach, and the moment Hero realised he couldn't take her memory again he'd kill her, and she wouldn't be able to stop him. She had no ace in the hole. No brilliant plan. She was going home, and there... She'd die.

Die at the hands of a man who had used her as a tool for too long. He'd used her for his own sexual gratification. And then he'd turned around and made her into a weapon of destruction. He'd made her his personal murderer. Hunting down anyone or anything that didn't do exactly as he wanted, as he demanded. Forcing the creation of his violent utopia.

She'd seen humanity now. Living at peace. They might think it was, but for her... It was. What they had was peace, and tolerance and... And she wanted it for herself.

Death meant something. Death meant being turned into raw energy so a heartless bastard who should have died long ago could hurt the people you cared about.

She hated herself.

There was so much guilt. So many things she knew she'd done, that she shouldn't have. So many more things she knew were memories that she didn't have anymore. Times when he would have pushed her over the line.

She needed to kill him, just to be able to live with herself. Yet, she couldn't see a way to get it done. She could attack him for all eternity, and he wouldn't even notice. He had the stored energy of all mortal deaths that happened during the calamity, and so many generations more. She was just a demon.

"Wow. Pity party, much."

Alexus looked in surprise at the pink-haired woman sitting nearby, "Sarin. The Fate."

The woman grinned at her tiredly, "Hey, Alexis. Sorry. I've been... Busy. Still am, to be honest. But, it looks like you need someone to talk to."

"Tell me how to kill Hero." Alexis said, sitting up, "Tell me I can do it. Please."

Sarin sighed, "I'd love to. Really. But I didn't even know he was Hero. I don't know it can be done. He deserves it, you're right. As to whether you'll succeed... The timelines are fucked. Completely in flux. That's part of why I agreed to a new treaty. Reality is... Getting out of control. It'll be damaged soon, if the gods don't stop getting in each other's way."

"Treaty?"

Sarin frowned, "Oh. Right. You hadn't heard. Never mind. It isn't important. Focus on your task. Freeing the Furies from his control."

"What can you tell me?" Alexis asked, sniffing, "About the Furies?"

Sarin tapped her chin, "Where to start? Uh... You were created by Yio. To serve as Guardians for humanity. Every world has a shrine, a focal point of the god that forged it. Every race has exceptional warriors capable of protecting it. The human who was supposed to be a Guardian, abandoned his role, in search of power. So Yio made you guys. You're not demons. You're eternal. Personally, I think Yio was trying to one-up F'rir. That the Furies were supposed to be better elfin or something."

Alexus wiped her face, "We're eternal? We lived here?"

"Yeah. You belong here." Sarin shrugged, "You should have felt it by now. That no matter where you travel, you feel like you're home. That you can relax. That you're safe."

She nodded, and waved around, “This felt... Natural. Making this thing. I never even bothered to put a guard on the door.”

Sarin smiled, “You are home, Alexis. I hope you’ll come back.”

“There’s no coming back.” She winced, “He’s going to kill me.”

“Hey.” Sarin said softly, shuffling over and putting an arm around her, “Where’s my angry little demon girl gone? The one arrogant enough to call Trei a bastard?”

Alexis smiled weakly, “I did do that, didn’t I?”

“You did.” Sarin laughed, “And the mortal you were trying so hard to not kill was actually Wrodin. Banished and stripped of divinity.”

Alexis felt the colour drain from her face, “Kregstad. I thought I did kill him. He was... Annoying.”

“No shit.” Sarin elbowed her, “We stripped him of his divinity. He annoyed us too. But no, Kao made sure he survived.”

She felt the scar on her stomach, where the mortal had stabbed her with the sword. “What about... Her? Is she okay?”

“She’s... Sort of in your position.” Sarin sighed, “Upset. Missing Dyys. Apparently she was never told that it was a promise knot.”

Alexis coughed nervously, “Um... What? Dyys proposed without proposing?”

“Yeah.” Sarin laughed, “Dyys wasn’t any better than you are at handling emotions. I think it’s a Fury thing. You’re all so pent up, and full of energy. So angry all the time that you don’t even realise that you feel other things. That anger isn’t the most powerful emotion when it comes to magic.”

Alexis looked at the Fate in surprise, “It isn’t? What is?”

“I don’t know if it’ll help.” Sarin shrugged, “It’s love, of course. Anger makes you strong, but love makes you connected. It makes your will stronger than another. It doesn’t matter how much mana your enemy has if your will is stronger than theirs. Heck, we just saw a demonstration of that when my very mortal High Priestess stood up to Kru, and managed to beat her. Her will was stronger, because she wouldn’t surrender the woman she loved to a fate like that.”

Alexis looked down, “I guess it doesn’t help. Dyys is gone. She died, touching the lifestream. Taken to the afterlife.”

“Who told you that?”

Alexis frowned, looking up at the concerned black eyes in surprise, “Kru did.”

“Well, that’s a lie.” Sarin scoffed, “Dyys soul is trapped in her body. Bound there, by a spell she herself cast. She knew she’d die. She chose how she’d die.”

Alexis blinked, “Wait. She can be brought back?”

“She will be.” Sarin laughed, “I don’t know when, but eventually. She’ll wake up, underground, buried under a dead tree.”

The Fury clenched her fists, “I screwed up. Again.”

“Not this time.” Sarin squeezed her shoulder, “You made it so he couldn’t find her.”

The colour drained from her face as she remembered. Remembered that Dyys had said that he had been to the mortal world. That he had tracked her and destroyed the book she'd been reading.

"Kregstad."

Sarin grinned, "Now you're getting it."

With that, the Fate vanished, right as the hovel exploded into black flames around her. Alexis face hit the dirt as a fist like a falling star struck her face. She didn't get a chance to groan or yell before boot crashed down on her head, cracking her skull. She could feel it. Her skull had actually cracked under the impact.

Death was just a matter of time, now.

She wrenched his foot aside, and launched to her feet. Her fist snapped through the air as she let the suppression field on her magic go. Her hair igniting to life, hissing and snapping at his face as he blocked her blows, and returned his own.

She could strike back, she could punch fast enough to shatter the air and shake the ground. Yet, he could block her, and his return strikes sent her sprawling.

There was no talking, nothing to say. He had come to kill her, and she had nothing to offer him. If she was pretending to be the loyal little demon, she'd bow down and let him end her. If she wasn't, she had to keep fighting. To stay alive.

Hero's golden eyes blazed like the sun, and he drew his sword. The sword that Dyys had made for him.

She didn't get a chance to touch her knife before her hand disappeared, floating aside in the air as a shoulder slammed into her and sent her tumbling through the buildings. She could see mortals fleeing, and mortals dying. Every strike of either of them caused shockwaves, tearing apart internal organs of the weaker species. The mortals never had a chance here. All she could do was buy them time to flee, before he accidentally killed them all.

The sword was supposed to banish. To banish all those who called the Hall of Hells, home.

Nothing happened when her hand was taken. Taken like everything else he took. Yet, she had an advantage now. She didn't call hell home. She called it prison. Just a lie, an abuse, perpetuated by the man in front of her. He wasn't surprised he couldn't banish, or if he did, he didn't let it slow his reactions or attacks.

Alexus hit the ground again as her left leg was cut apart with a burst of blood, sinew and crushed bone.

Wrodin

He sat idly, relaxing as he watched the merciless drills running in front of him. He smiled to himself as the familiar clatter of wooden swords gave him a taste of nostalgia. He had missed this, even if he hadn't quite realised it.

Alfiti dropped from somewhere overhead, landing beside him on the bench, "Oh, so surprising. The god of war is watching people play at war."

"This isn't war." He laughed with amusement, "This is just a game."

The elf shrugged, leaning back, "So. Do you know why we're here, yet?"

"I haven't heard anything more." He shrugged, "Is that surprising?"

"No." The elf replied, her ears twitching, "I just don't like sitting still."

Wrodin glanced at her, "Why did you let Alphege become Guardian again? You could have kept the role. You were better at it than her. Stronger. She slept whilst the Fel infected her and gave Drak'tur a way into Eldrasa. You fought him, and damn near succeeded without the help of Kru."

Alfiti blew a tuft of her hair, "No I didn't. Wintry nearly did. It was all her. Yio, Elin, Kao, and I... We were just along for the ride. That Protoanimarum was far more powerful than any of us. Far kinder, and far more intelligent. She may have been the best person I ever met."

"She's not dead."

Alfiti jerked her head, "What? Wintry's alive?"

"Of course." Wrodin laughed, "Do you really think Kao would have let that happen? She wasn't allowed to be with Wintry because of the treaties. But the treaties only apply to us... To celestials. To them."

Alfiti smiled, "Still getting used to that?"

"I'm... Getting there." Wrodin smiled. "I used to wonder how mortals could waste their lives so easily, considering how short they were... Now, I don't see my days as wasted. Even when I do nothing at all. I feel... Content."

Alfiti nodded, "So... Where is Wintry?"

"Squirrelled away with Kao somewhere." He shrugged, "Just because she isn't divine anymore doesn't mean that Kao's powers have been taken. She's still the first of all of us. She knows more than any of us ever will. She doesn't want to be found, which means that we can't find her."

The elf shook her head, "Nope. Not getting it. If she isn't divine... How can she do that stuff?"

"Divinity has more to do with responsibility." Wrodin shrugged, "Vastras and Tyr both became as powerful as gods. Drak'tur had the power of a god. It didn't make any of them into divine beings. Yet, Kru inherited the mantle of chaos. Trei inherited death. Summer has the light. There are things they're supposed to do, to keep things running. The power is just the tools they need to get it done."

The elf nodded, and picked a leaf fragment from behind one of her curved fangs, "What about you?"

"I got stripped off both power and divinity." He replied, "Because I was an idiot. It was well

deserved.”

Alfiti looked at him, “Sorry if this is offensive, but you’re nothing like the god I remember.”

“Good.” He smiled sadly, “As a god. . . I was vindictive, and petty and cruel. I was a tyrant and a butcher. I forced war upon people who weren’t ready for it. Taught it to people who didn’t need it. I spread my power and influence so that I could gain power and influence. Look at the other celestials. Sarin, the most manipulative of all the Fates, who wants to have fun and see lives tangled in inextricable knots. She has spent most of her life seeking peace. She stops now and then to tangle love knots, and laugh at the ensuing chaos, but she doesn’t let it define her. She draws true loves together. She gives up her desire to see cute conflict, so that people can be happy. She gives mercies to some, like yourself. Briefly uniting you, before the larger picture requires you get torn apart.”

Alfiti’s spear appeared at his throat, “Talk about Kyrus again. Please.”

She was right. He didn’t deserve to raise that particular topic. Not when he was a reason that her love’s soul no longer existed. Kyrus had died in the war he had instigated. A war that ended with his own fall. Some had come back, but resurrection was always a tense topic among the gods.

Every time someone came back, nature took it out on the rest of reality.

Trei’s resurrection had caused mass droughts and flooding. He was a nobody, amongst humanity. He was important, but only after his death. The number of recent resurrections, and the size and scale of them, was extremely concerning. There was no balance, but one would need to be achieved, or chaotic places where the fabric of reality was torn would begin to spread. One of Yurk’s borders rested on a place like that. They didn’t need more of them.

Resurrecting Kyrus had been debated. Trei had even tried to intercede on Alfiti’s behalf, but that conversation had gone nowhere. He wasn’t useful for the future. Nobody absolutely needed a bartender and brigand. He had good taste in food and drink, but that wasn’t reason enough to tip the scales of reality. To risk killing millions of people.

There were only a handful of gods who would ignore those sorts of stakes. Yio, Kao, himself. . . And all of them had recently become mundane. They’d been forced out of their positions for being too dangerous to the other gods. Becoming tools for them to use.

“I’m sorry.”

Alfiti withdrew the spear, placing it on her back, “Weird. It almost sounded like you meant it.”

“People were nothing, once.” He shrugged, “Just pieces in a game. An endless game. They aren’t anymore. I can see some of what I’ve done.”

Alfiti’s ears went red, “Sorry.”

“For what?” He scoffed, “Judging me for the worthless sack of shit I have been for the last couple hundred thousand years? That seems like I might deserve it.”

She shook her head, “No. I’m sorry you can see it now. I pity you. That’s something that might take another hundred thousand years to get used to. To forgive yourself for.”

Wrodin smiled, “Thankyou, Alfiti. I actually, I have a great coping mechanism. I won’t forgive myself.”

She rolled her eyes, “I think you know how great that is.”

“I was a terrible god, I can be a terrible mortal.” He grinned, trying to make light of it.

The elf didn’t say anything. She didn’t approve, but she was giving him the space to breathe.

The space to try and work things out on their own.

“Ladies!” A voice boomed, and he jerked towards the praetor, who was waving, “Instead of just sitting there, why don’t you show my soldiers how it’s done? What do you say?”

“I’d rather they live.” Alfiti replied with a laugh.

Wrodin stood up, stretching, “I haven’t personally been in a battle in over a hundred years. Never once in this stupid mortal body. So I guess, it might be an even match.”

He had to confess, he just wanted to fight. He hadn’t been able to for so long. Once because he became too powerful a god, capable of ripping the fabric of reality apart even when he was suppressing himself as much as he could. Then, because he was running away. He hadn’t accepted his mortality. He ran away from every connection to anybody living, right up until a goddess had forced him.

He was grateful to Kao.

The praetor offered him a wooden sword. He considered it, and then shook his head. “Let’s see how well a legionnaire can do against an unarmed man.”

He didn’t really have any reason for the confidence, but he had it all the same. He didn’t know if it was deserved. He’d find out.

He lined himself up against the soldier in their leather armour, watching their stance carefully. It was classic Balavidian. Heavy on the front foot, allowing for quick stabs and lunges, but falling back from offence to defence took a little bit more time, which is why they tended to counter rather than block. All stances had trade offs. This one wasn’t so bad.

For himself, Wrodin planted his feet horizontally, leaning on no foot, and for the untrained he looked completely open. He heard Alfiti shift uncomfortably on the chair in the background. He was nervous as well. He could feel sweat on the palms of his hands. That wasn’t something he’d needed to deal with as a god. He’d never had a reason as a god to doubt his success. His confidence was always well placed. He never had a chance at death.

Even in a training match, as a mortal, death was a possibility.

The legionnaire snapped towards him, wooden blade whistling through the air. He saw it coming, but he could only move just as fast as the blade. He stepped sideways, elbow driving into the gut of the man, utilising the man’s own aggressive attack as part of the force. As it connected and their grip weakened, his other hand grabbed the elbow of the sword arm, squeezing weakly against a pressure point. It was enough that they dropped the sword.

He spun behind the soldier as they instinctively recovered their weapon, and planted a foot against their ass as hard as he could. The soldier was unbalanced, and overcompensating for his attack. They flew face forward into the ground, but didn’t stop there as he grabbed them by their ankles and hauled as hard as he could.

The soldier went spinning and crashed into one of the hay bales.

Wrodin moved back to his waiting stance. The match wasn’t over until the praetor called it.

The legionnaire staggered upright, spitting straw with surprise. They looked him up and down, and moved their centre of gravity lower and began to cautiously approach. He sighed, “Come on. Put some effort in. The same thing won’t work twice. Just because you have better balance doesn’t mean lunging will work.”

The soldier pirouetted on their foot, exchanging their sword as they spun it around and swept

it towards him. It very nearly took him to surprise as he dropped backwards, letting the wooden blade trim the air above him. If that had hit, it would have broken several ribs. Yet, it didn't. Instead he used his arms to propel himself upright with a dual-kick to the centre of the warrior's chest, knocking them backwards into a solid training dummy.

Wrodin landed on his left foot and spun, delivering a punch to the side of the legionnaire's head, striking it into the wooden shield of the dummy. There was a crunching sound, and he stepped back with a wince. Maybe that had been too much. This was supposed to be just a training session.

"Ash, Wrodin!" Alfiti snapped, running up beside him. She grabbed either side of the man's head, "What was done, is undone."

He sighed heavily. His fist didn't even hurt, and he was very nearly guilty of another killing.

"Adaptable." The praetor said softly, walking over and looking at both of them, "Legionnaire, you made the mistake of thinking of this as just a training match. You didn't consider your environment. Every single attack and defence of this man was based on his environment. He used the mud beneath your feet to encourage you to forget your balance. He used the archery targets to preserve your life, and the dummy to take it, though I think it was just meant to be a warning."

Wrodin held out a hand, helping the legionnaire upright, "My apologies."

The soldier snapped a fist to his chest, "None are needed, sir."

"No." Wrodin sighed, "They are. I never want to kill again."

The praetor looked at him in shock, "Then why would you agree to this?"

"I miss it." Wrodin shrugged, "I didn't think I'd actually pose a threat to their life. I'm a freaking mortal who has never fought in battle. I am not who I was, praetor. I am not your god. I'm... Human. I wanted the exercise. I even tried to balance things in their favour."

The praetor nodded, "You never picked up a weapon, or tried to take theirs. True. I've never seen that fighting style. Where did you learn it?"

"Every soldier has seen it." Wrodin laughed, "These are the fighting talents of a cornered man. A desperate man. You used half of them when you were trapped in... The mine."

She woman's eyes flashed angrily, "You remember watching me. In the mine. We will have that conversation sometime."

He bowed, and then again to his opponent, and began walking away. The elf joined him, and he sighed, "Thankyou, Alfiti. I really... Didn't think that..."

"Mortals are frail." She sighed with exasperation, "You knocked his skull into the side of a thin but solidly planted piece of wood. Either you'd kill him on the spot, or cause the cell wall of one of the brain's blood vessels to weaken. They would die, at some random point. Deemed by fate, god, or just bad luck. But they'd still die."

Wrodin nodded, "I know. The number of soldiers I collected long after a war had already done its damage... You can't safely strike a mortal. It takes skill."

"Skill you don't have." Alfiti laughed, "You were brutal, but that was all. No finesse. You sure you used to do this as a living?"

He rolled his eyes at her insult.

"Wrodin?" She asked, pausing as they reached an overpass in the structure.

He turned to her in surprise, "What is it, Alfiti?"

She twirled a strand of her blonde hair, “Do you think I’m pretty?”

His thoughts exploded like a mirror hit by cannon fire. This could be a trap. It wouldn’t be unlike an elf to make a human admit feelings, just so they could dash them apart. It might also be an honest opinion, though he didn’t see how she could be remotely interested in him. His mortal form was unattractive, and it stank. He wasn’t something anybody should want.

If he said the wrong thing here, or hesitated too long, he’d insult her. He hadn’t considered her, because he hadn’t considered romantic involvement at all. Now he was looking at her, at those serious blue eyes and her flowing golden strands, he knew she was incredibly attractive. He also equally knew he was the direct cause of the death of the last man she’d loved, and she still seemed upset about that.

Alfiti laughed and punched his shoulder, “Oh, messing with you is going to be fun. Come along, ex-god.”

She danced off, a spring in her step, and he rubbed the side of his head. She hadn’t really confirmed or denied anything at all. She’d just managed to put him in his place. Now he’d be walking on eggshells around her.

He rolled his jaw and walked up after her, “And where are you taking me?”

“Lover’s tryst.” She teased.

Wrodin visibly cringed. She was going to be playing this as long as she could.

Dyys

Dirt suddenly poured down her throat. She panicked, trying to move, to struggle. She couldn't. She couldn't move her arms to try and block her mouth. There was some sort of pressure, pushing down on her. Squeezing her from every direction.

Her hair ignited.

Dyys exploded out of the ground, crashing to her knees and hacking out dust, dirt and rock. She gasped raggedly, holding her throat. Everything hurt. Everything. Like she was on fire, but deeper than that.

She breathed out slowly, evenly, trying to calm herself. She staggered upright, she needed to find water. To ease her throat, and from the feel of her tongue she was dehydrated. Like something had been leaching the moisture out of her.

She couldn't really remember what had happened. Every time she reached out for a memory it disappeared like a mist. She just knew she was thirsty, sore, and that waking up underground meant something. She didn't know what, but she had a feeling that it was bad.

She was by a road, if you could call a dirt track carved into a hill a road. Wells tended to be by roads. This was the mortal world. Why was she here? She wasn't a hunter. Had she got caught trying to steal snacks again? Usually if she was doing that she'd have a handful of portal scrolls to burn through to get where she was going. Didn't seem like she had those on her.

She had her carved knife, some blank scroll paper, and a recently charged crystal, but nothing else. No food or water. Which, looking around seemed to be a seriously bad thing. The matrix of the world was infected. Magic was being transformed into the Fel, lacing over the world. Only a world-disaster level event could have done this. Why couldn't she remember it?

What the heck was happening with her memory?

She went to walk down the road, but instantly spun in the opposite direction, as if something had wrenched her head around. That was something. A disturbing something, but something. Something was calling to her. Calling her soul. She may as well answer it. One direction was as good as another, and maybe they'd have answers.

Her hair complained as she walked, rubbing their scales against each other and dropping dirt into her eyes. She blew a warning at them to chill. She wanted a shower just as much as they did. It wasn't pleasant to wake up buried two meters down... The penny finally dropped, and Dyys swore quietly.

"Kregstad. I died."

With that admission a flurry of images came pulsing back. Culminating with seeing Alexis' cute face as she watched in horror as she sacrificed herself by reaching out and touching the lifestream itself. Something that only the most powerful mages, and the gods, should be able to do. Not something demons were supposed to ever be able to do. They were supposed to be cursed. It had killed her, but it should have simply been unreachable.

She'd touched the lifestream. The knowledge of magic and make up of the world had pulsed inside her skull. She couldn't remember most of it, and knew that part of her memory was unlikely to ever come back. Yet, it had taught her enough. More than enough.

She fell to her knees, leaning her head back and snapped her fingers.

Glorious, crisp and cold, water poured out of the air and into her mouth.

She gulped it down faster than should have, ignoring that she was feeling dehydrated. It didn't take long for the bloat and nausea to hit. She fell forward, vomiting as her hair squealed in delight as the water cascaded over her. She lay there, on hands and knees, shaking. She'd never felt this weak in her whole life. She felt... Incomplete. Broken.

She felt like crying. Alexis would do the right thing. She'd find and stop Hero. She couldn't help her, not with the binding drawing her towards whatever was calling her. Once she'd broken the spell, she'd go. She'd save her friend. Save all the Furies. Drag them out of the hell that was not their home. She'd take them back to where they belonged, back across the sea.

There, at the Shrine to Yio, she'd plant Hero's head on a pike and offer it up as sacrifice.

Dyys stood up, cutting off her shower, and smiled grimly. She knew what she was, and now she knew what she could do. What she was capable of.

It didn't take her long to scuff out a series of runes on the roadway. She bit her wrist, and sprayed blood across the sigil. It ignited, and instantly showed her a small image. Two women, walking slowly. One was stiff and upright, a soldier of some kind. The other was more relaxed, but even more reserved. That was the mage that had bound her soul, and dragged her out of her grave.

She took the charged crystal from her belt and tossed it in her hand gently, and then slammed the doorway into being in front of her, and stepped through it.

Bel

She looked up, stopping and drawing her sword as a doorway appeared on the road in front of them.

The praetor clenched her hands anxiously, before resorting to an unarmed fighting stance. She considered giving the soldier her sword. They'd probably be better with it than she was, which might be necessary when facing such obvious magic. All the same, Bel hadn't felt the effects from consuming Dyys' blood fade yet. She'd expected it disappear when the woman died, but it hadn't. Maybe the bracelet had been feeding the energy to her. If she still had the demon blood, she would probably be stronger and faster than Lilibeth could hope to be.

The door shot open and she threw herself to the side. It was all she could do. She still felt claws tear through her skin and into the muscles below. She hit the ground rolling, coming up and holding her side, struggling to breathe.

She could see Lilibeth had been knocked flying, and her face had been slashed open.

A figure stood in the roadway, glowing red hair, a bundle of snakes. A Fury. The woman spoke without turning, "I hope I make my point clear, mage. Now. Why did you summon me?"

Bel dropped her sword, and ran towards her, crying.

The Fury spun to glare at her, and Bel signed, "Dyys!"

The woman blinked in confusion, "You can't speak? What the hells? Then how did you cast the spell to summon me?"

Bel wiped away tears, feeling her nose beginning to run, "You're alive. It worked. Thank Meria, it worked."

The Fury held up a hand, "Stop it. I don't understand sign. I need to understand you. . . And why you look so weirdly happy to see me. So. . . I'm sorry. I'm going to dive inside your head for a moment."

It felt like someone had jabbed a lance between her eyeballs. She collapsed backwards, grabbing the sides of her head and screaming silently. Dyys put a gentle hand on her forehead, "Sshhh. It'll hurt less if you stop fighting it. Please. I'm not trying to hurt you."

"Get away from her!" Lilibeth roared, and Bel realised she'd probably picked up the sword.

"Stop!" She signalled, struggling to roll over.

Lilibeth glared, "She's hurting you. She attacked us."

Bel frantically pointed at her wrist and to Dyys and back. The praetor sneered, "This is your friend? The one who saved the prince? She'll kill us."

The pain in her skull increased, and she felt like she was about to throw up.

"Bel? What are you doing?"

She went white, slowly standing up. She was in the middle of the pigpen. Soaked in mud. Even her hair was dripping with it, and she turned slowly. Leaning on the fence, face lit up with a huge smile, was Izak.

She remembered this. This was a memory. She didn't want to relive it. The embarrassment. The sweetness. He was gone. She'd buried him. He wasn't coming back.

Izak jumped over the fence, laughing as he walked up to her, and put a hand on her caked cheek. He didn't say anything. He just kissed her. She was too surprised to say or do anything.

He'd never kissed her. They'd held hands, but that was about it. He chose now, when she'd been defeated by a fast and annoying piglet, to show he cared about her?

Terrible timing.

"Get inside!" Izak yelled, grabbing her shoulders. He tossed her, throwing her onto the verandah. She tumbled inside the doorway when it hit. She didn't have a chance to try and help Izak. She screamed silently, curling into a ball as flames shot through the doorway, scorching it, and her.

She stood over his grave, crying. Wishing it meant that she couldn't speak, but her hands were steady. As she apologised, over and over and over. He died for her. She didn't deserve to survive. He did. If he had survived then maybe the farm wouldn't be gone.

She stood topless by the well, looking down sadly at the water, considering if she should just fall in.

"So... Modesty isn't your thing?"

She turned and made an angry response to the mage. To Dyys.

Dyys hesitated, clumsily making a sign, "So... This sign. That's idiot, right?"

Bel blushed in surprise, and nodded.

She flicked the side of Dyys head, glaring.

The Fury turned to her, smiling sheepishly, "Sorry. I should look when I talk. Right?"

She nodded stiffly. She wanted to say a lot more than just that, but she held back. It wasn't like Dyys could understand if she did.

She stroked the hair as it was held out to her, and she felt something she hadn't felt in a very long time. She'd started to forgive herself, when she knew there was hope for the farm. But this was different. It felt like betraying Izak in some ways, but in other ways it felt freeing. As if she'd found what she wanted.

Dyys smiled, "Feels normal, doesn't it? It is, for the most part. But, if you wanted a bit of power, for a spell or something, you could take one of my hairs. They store about the same as your average quartz crystal."

That wasn't what had surprised her at all. The silky hair felt nice to touch, and she wanted to bury her face in it. To surround herself with the smell, to hold the softness of the owner against her.

The Fury leaned back in the chair, "I'm sorry. I'm tired. If you need something, wake me up?"

She nodded, feeling heart broken. Not knowing how to talk to the mage.

Dyys stood up, and scratched her chin. She plucked one of her hairs with a wince. She tied it into a small knot, and then looped it around Bel's wrist and tied it into a bracelet.

She looked at the bracelet in surprise, trying not to feel like it meant as much as it felt it did.

"If you need me, break the bracelet." Dyys smiled, "It won't matter where you are, I'll hear it. Okay? So we don't have a repeat of this morning. I know you can take care of yourself, but I figured fighting bandits naked was a bit much."

Bel nodded, blushing as she suddenly realised just how much of her body Dyys had seen. And she'd acted like it was nothing at all. Too depressed to realise exactly how hot the woman looking at her was. The woman who had clearly been checking her out.

She rocked upright, her back, sides and face stinging violently. She stood amongst the rubble, looking at Dyys.

She could see her. For the first time, she could actually see her.

She saw the glowing red snakes. The scales, and the fangs. Tiny black eyes, and forked tongues flicking the air. She saw that the belt around her waist was not a belt. It was something alive, but hidden. She saw Dyys' eyes. Vertical slits, glowing inside with power, and fear. Terror rolled off the demon like a wave. She could feel it crashing into her. She could feel the anxiety building, but she couldn't look away.

She heard Dyys' voice inside her head. "Sorry, kid."

Bel ran forward and slammed into a golden barrier, breaking her nose with a crunch. She fell backwards holding her face and bleeding, staring. She signed silently. "No."

Dyys smiled at her, and then the light went out. The demon dropped from the air, falling gracefully for a moment before landing awkwardly with the cracking of bones. The other one landed softly in front of her, barely bending her knees at all.

Bel breathed out heavily as the pain inside her skull faded.

She heard the woman beside her flop onto the roadway, exhausted. Lilibeth was still watching, sword at the ready, but her stance relaxed a little. Bel looked over at Dyys sadly, and saw the woman staring at the sky, crying quietly.

She moved to her knees, shuffling over as she held her bleeding side, and smiled down at those strange red eyes. She patted her head gently, stroking it. The snakes didn't bite her. They seemed to wriggle towards her. To feel her touch. She flinched as she saw what she thought was going to be bite, but it wasn't. It was a gentle kiss.

Dyys smiled up at her, "I am not worth your time, Bel. Damn. What did you have to go through to get me back? From hell?"

Bel shook her head and held up her wrist.

Lilibeth added, cautiously, "Meria helped her resurrect you."

Dyys blinked. "Huh. So Alexis must have buried me. Gone to fight the Marked, alone."

The Fury suddenly seemed to see the blood pouring over her fingers and sat up, "Kregstad. I... I shouldn't have hurt you. I am so sorry."

Her gentle hand touched Bel's with a thrill that caught in her throat. There was a soft and warm feeling, and then the pain faded away. She looked down, and Dyys smiled, "All better."

She stood up, and put a hand on her hip, "Drop the sword soldier. So I can heal you, too."

Lilibeth collapsed.

Bel saw Dyys catch her with not some little jealousy, and then recoiled with nausea as she saw Lilibeth's face stitched itself back together. Not something for a tired and hungry person to watch.

Dyys laid the soldier down gently, and then turned back, "I meant it, Bel. I'm sorry... I am so sorry..."

The Fury burst into tears, falling to her knees. Bel dove into her, knocking her onto the hard roadway, wrapping her arms around her and crying. She had her back. She didn't care if she wasn't intact. If her memory was crap. She had her back. The Fates had taken someone she'd cared about once before, she wasn't going to waste what little time she had this time.

She didn't know if Dyys felt similarly. Or could even remember those feelings if she had them.

But she had to know, and as the Fury didn't speak sign, it really only gave her one option. Or that was how she justified it to her terrified heart.

She leaned up and kissed Dyys cheek.

She felt the heart beneath hers accelerate, and the mage stared into her, her hair dancing upright. Watching her, hesitating. It seemed that anytime Bel wanted to know what Dyys was thinking, she just had to look to her hair.

The mage winced, "I... I'm twelve thousand years old. At least. Hard to know. I'm a bit... Old for you. Aren't I?"

Bel glared at her.

The demon swallowed nervously, "You can offer me your life, Bel. I can't do the same. I have an eternal soul. Unless someone kills me... Again... I'll live forever. How much longer do you have? Four decades? I..."

Bel ground her teeth. Dyys smiled slowly, "Stop making excuses?"

She nodded curtly.

Dyys smiled slowly, "Oh crap. Someone told you what the knot meant. Didn't they?"

Lilibeth spoke tiredly from somewhere in the background, "Meria'el. She thought it was cute."

Dyys blushed, "How are you still awake?"

"I'm not." Lilibeth replied with a slur, "And I'm totally not just waiting for you to kiss already."

Bel blushed as well at that. Dyys reached up, and grabbed one of her hairs, which reverted to a strand, and plucked it with a wince. She twisted it into a knot, and grabbed Bel's wrist, wrapping it around her. "This... Is a promise. That any time you need me, any time you want me, I will come to you. A promise that I will put your needs above my own. A promise that my life now belongs to you."

Bel wasn't quite sure how she felt about that vow. It seemed sweet on the surface, with undertones of the control that seemed to be a part of the Fury's nature. All Furies. They were a brutal people. Maybe this was a way of expressing equality, if she said the same thing. Maybe demonkind always thought of everything in terms of ownership.

"Kiss the girl!" Lilibeth complained.

Dyys kissed her. Bel hadn't been expecting it. Soft lips touching hers. Sharp fangs that felt like burning pinpricks to her tongue. She felt the tangle of her hair kissing her forehead gently, as Dyys' arms moved around her waist, pulling her closer.

Bel fell into the embrace, into the kiss.

She hadn't been entirely sure how she felt about Dyys. She was now. She wanted every part of the woman to herself. She would fight whoever it took, to protect her. She would not survive if she had to watch her die again. She knew the age thing would become a problem at some point, but for now, they were the same maturity, and they cared about each other. Age differences between species wasn't something she'd learned about. They'd work it out as they had to.

The ground rumbled, and Dyys broke the kiss slowly. Bel glared at her and kissed her again, a short and quick one. Then she looked sideways towards what was interrupting them. A dust cloud was moving down the road.

Dyys went to sit up, but Bel didn't move, pinning the woman to the ground. She smiled innocently, and Dyys just laughed, "I could move you."

She signed casually, "You won't."

Dyys blew her hair, "Probably right. I am feeling a bit awkward down there."

Bel looked down at her in shock at the admission, and she saw her red the Fury's face was. Her own was probably similar. Whoever was interrupting them would probably regret it.

Lilibeth stood up, leaning on the sword gently, "Those are Balavidian cavalry. What are they doing out here?"

Bel squeezed Dyys' hand gently.

Lilibeth

She was somewhat thankful for the interruption. She had a feeling if the cavalry hadn't arrived, she would be sitting in some ditch with her hands over her ears to pretend that they weren't doing anything at all.

It was understandable. One of them had been dead, and the other had watched. She didn't know if she'd be able to cope in that situation. She'd probably be alternating between punching, crying and kissing Aurili. If the praetor was willing to break her vow. Things would probably be even more awkward if she didn't.

Lilibeth waved as the lead rider pulled up by them.

They saluted with a fist to their chest, "Praetor. I have been sent to retrieve you. . . Though we were only expecting two."

Lilibeth frowned, "We were expected?"

"Scouts have been watching the road for your approach, for two days." The soldier spoke gruffly, "At the orders of Praetor Aurili. I know no more than that, praetor."

She shrugged, "Fine. Lets mount up."

Bel pouted, but helped Dyys to her feet. Those two were going to find the nearest broom closet the moment no one was watching them, she guaranteed it. She'd seen that kind of intensity before in certain young recruits. It didn't tend to last, but if it did, the relationship tended to be unbreakable. There was no punishment that could discourage it at this level of passion.

She grabbed the hand of a soldier, swinging up easily behind one of them, right as she heard a horse neigh in terror. She glanced over and saw Dyys laughing, leaning on her knees and wiping the tears from her eyes.

"What's going on?"

Dyys looked over at her, "You expect a horse to carry. . . Me? A Fury? Are you kidding? Not even a unicorn could keep their calm. No, I'll walk."

Lilibeth rolled her eyes, "Sorry. Not aware of the finer points of demonology. Will you be able to keep up?"

Dyys stretched and shrugged, "We're only going a couple leagues aren't we? I can probably sprint that, but then you'd have problems keeping up with me."

The praetor smiled at the brag and turned, "Lets go, legionnaire."

The group of scouts set off at a pace. This was an urgent pace. She wondered just what the orders the scouts had been given were. They'd conveniently not told her everything. Maybe that was for the best. She wasn't sure just how she was going to explain how she was alive to Aurili. Or how someone else had to finish the mission, and protect the prince.

Two of the three of them had been resurrected.

The familiar jerk of the saddle made her realise just how tired she was, and she find herself drifting off to sleep.

Alexus

She was defeated.

She couldn't fight. All she could do was bleed out and die. He'd cut her hand off. He'd cut half her leg off. And finally, he'd severed her spine. He'd done it. Defeated her without even saying a word about why he was doing it.

Then he left.

Hero killed her, and walked away. Back to turning Fury against Fury. To pretending to be their lord and master. Their saviour from the terrible lot in life the other gods had cursed them with. Pretending that Furies were just occasional freaks born from demonkind.

All that was left was for her to stare at the sky until the darkness finally closed in.

"Lebt es noch?"

Alexus rolled her eyes. She didn't know the language, but it wasn't like she could answer. She wasn't breathing. All of that was gone. The only things she could do was think and die. Didn't matter that some idiot had found her. Any sensible individual finding destroyed hills, burning fields, and blood sprayed across leagues of roadway would run in the other direction as fast as they could. So they were an idiot.

"Es lebt!" The voice exclaimed with somewhat flat intonations, and her eyes watered as the went from the dark dirt to the brilliant white of the sky.

"Wirbelsäulenrekonstruktion. Nachwachsen der Gliedmaßen. Nervenstimulation und Anhaftung." The voice spoke, as if it were handing out instructions. She felt something almost immediately, which was surprising. She'd thought she was down to just feeling the cold.

There was a series of mechanical clicks, and then she wished she could only feel the cold. She wished that had nerves were dead and not screaming at the top of their lungs about the missing limbs, the broken ribs. "Punktierte Lunge. Bevorstehende Herzinsuffizienz. Mögliches Aneurysma."

She understood one of those words. Aneurysm. There was something wrong inside her brain, and if she lived, it would probably kill her. There wasn't a way to heal something like that. Well, a master healer could, but they were fewer than master warriors. Something blocked out the light, and she felt a hand prop her eyelid open. Something cold and sharp shoved itself around her eye.

If she could scream, she would have.

"Neuronale Rekonstruktion. Aktiviere die magische Matrix erneut. Notreparaturen einleiten."

She gasped as her hair burst into colour, and she nearly gasped that she could gasp. She could breathe again. She could feel her body being forced by something to work overtime, pulling her back together. She pushed herself up slowly with one arm, looking at her saviour.

She almost wished she'd died. She looked at the short golden-eyed creature and winced, "Kregstad den alma. You're a dwergaz."

"Æþelred." The creature bowed to her, and then adjusted a small metal box by its neck, and spoke mechanically, "You speak Wyyrdin?"

She nodded slowly, "I am a Fury."

"Fascinating." It replied to her, "A magical species constructed as a weapon for defence. I was not aware that they also gave you consciousness. Perhaps that was the flaw in the design of the Wächterin."

“Guardian.” Alexis spoke slowly, “Wait... Is that what the Furies were supposed to be?”

“As I understand it.” Æpelred replied, “I believe the initial design was by Yio. One of the Fate Triune.”

Alexis nodded, and then flinched, holding up her wrist. She looked at it in surprise, at the scabbing surface, “What is going on there?”

“Your healing powers have been accelerated. You are regenerating the missing appendage.” The dwergaz intoned, “I’m afraid my assistance is limited. I only have a handful of mechanisms to hand, a few million. It is enough to boost your natural processes, but not to generate new constructions of their own.”

She smiled at the creature, not quite knowing how to explain to it that no one was capable of that today. That so many of his race’s secrets had died with them.

“Why did you help me?”

The dwergaz shrugged, “It was a challenge.”

She laughed, “A challenge. I guess that’s as good a reason as any. I have a challenge. The one who did this to me.”

The dwergaz replied blankly, “I still possess a sense of self preservation. This challenge is one you will have to attempt alone.”

Worth a shot.

The creature held up a disc of silvery metal, “However, I do believe the defeat of that which harmed you is imperative. It is currently in a large city in that direction. Many creatures of similar magical power levels are gathering there. Perhaps they would be worth requesting aid from.”

Alexis blinked, “That way? A city... The Balavidian capital. Thankyou, dwergaz.”

Æpelred bowed towards her, “I wish the luck of the stars upon you, Fury.”

Wrodin

He looked at the open field as Alfiti casually spun her spear. "Show me what you have."

He glanced over at the elf, who was practically dancing. Anticipating stabbing him, and hurting him. Over and over. This was the excitement of a warrior.

"So when you said lover's tryst, you meant you would be handing me pieces of my backside?"

Alfiti laughed, blushing, "Oh fine. If you win, I'll give you a kiss."

Wrodin looked down nervously, "That is not what I meant."

He heard her giggle, but really didn't want to be pulled into yet another conversation where he wouldn't be able to say anything right.

He moved onto the field, "Well, you're not letting me out of this."

Alfiti nodded, "That's right."

She placed her spear gently on the ground, where it froze in place, standing upright. She cracked her knuckles, and grinned at him.

Wrodin's arms snapped up, his eyes widening in shock as Alfiti was instantly on top of him. He didn't see her move. She was just suddenly landing a punch.

His feet crushed into the soil as her fist struck his arms, cracking the bones inside. He was just a human mortal. What was she playing at?

Another blow pulverised the bones, and he flopped backwards onto the ground.

Alfiti stood over him, clapping slowly, "Well, that was certainly pathetic. Weren't you... A god?"

"I'm human." Wrodin moaned, trying not to move his arms that now had no rigidity to them.

Alfiti laughed, "And? Aren't you supposed to be Kao's champion?"

He glared at her, "You know more about what is going on. Don't you?"

"Duh." Alfiti rolled her eyes, "Of course I do. Now. Show me how exactly you're worthy of defending Kao. I don't want to worry about a weakness in our defence."

Wrodin ground his teeth. She really didn't care how much she hurt him. Maybe she was just being the elf who only cared about her mission. The one who had fought by Yio's side in Eldrasa.

"Sink." He said with a yawn, and heard Alfiti let out a particularly girly scream as the ground swallowed her up to her neck.

He stood up, his arms glowing as the magic healed them. He stretched weakly, and sighed, "I am human. Fragile. That doesn't mean I'm completely incapable of magic."

"Why the eiden can't I get out!?" Alfiti snapped, glaring at him, "I should be able to break out of the bloody ground!"

Wrodin blinked, "Because you need to break the spell holding you there, first."

Alfiti's cheek twitched. He was cheating a little. The elf wouldn't be able to see the spell, or feel it. He'd spoken it into existence, not cast it. He'd forced nature to obey his will to create the spell, which meant it faded into the background noise of the natural matrix.

The elf blew a tuft of her golden hair, "Eiden. I give up."

“Release.” Wrodin instructed.

The elf burst out of the ground, her spear appearing in her hand as she shoved it towards his throat. The blade of the Algar spear jerked to a stop as it hit a barrier no larger than a coin. Wrodin glared at her, and Alfiti pulled the spear back slowly, “Damn. Damn. Eiden mos takken da ran so fere.”

He grinned, “You certainly can swear like a sailor.”

Alfiti blushed and looked down, “Shut up.”

Wrodin turned to walked back towards the fortress, when he felt his wrist get caught. He looked back at the elf in confusion, which only heightened when she kissed him.

It was brief. Just a peck, but caught him full on the mouth.

Alfiti strode passed him, “Don’t say I don’t pay my debts. But seriously... When did you last wash that beard?”

He was more confused than ever. She didn’t need to kiss him. He had made it clear he didn’t think much of that joke. So why had she?

He was also embarrassed. He’d let an elf kiss him whilst he still looked, and smelled, and probably tasted, like a hermit from under a hill. Elfin were the picture of perfection, always. He could smell the beauty in her footsteps as she moved away.

“Come on, ex-god!” She shouted with irritation.

Wrodin rolled his eyes. He couldn’t say no to her. That was becoming obvious. He felt like he owed her, which he did. She’d died defending Eldrasa from things he set in motion. Her love had died in the same battle. Her queen had died in the same battle. Her mother was abused and used as a tool in that same battle.

He fell into step beside her, half a step behind. “Where are we going?”

“To explain things to you.” Alfiti snapped, as if it were obvious. She was probably still upset about the kiss.

The elf lead him into the fortress, passed guards and patrols. He wasn’t sure why there were so many soldiers inside the palace. They seemed to be getting more and more frequent the deeper they went.

The guest quarters seemed to have a dozen guards stationed at every bedroom doorway.

Alfiti paused by one of them and jerked a thumb, “Inside, Wrodin.”

He sighed as the guards moved aside, and he walked in. He looked around the bedroom as the door snapped closed behind him, isolating him. He couldn’t see anyone, at first glance. Was he just a prisoner, now?

“Nope.”

He spun around, blinking at the slime hanging from the wall. It dripped down and into the shape of a woman with disproportionate features, who stood up and grinned, placing a sticky and wet hand on his shoulder, “Nice to see you alive, Wrodin.”

He bowed, “Kao’el.”

She rolled her eyes, “You can drop the ’el. I’m not divine anymore. Wintry kind of convinced me I should do something after... What are the mortals calling it? The calamity?”

He nodded grimly, taking a step back, hoping he was out of reach of her slimy hands.

Kao laughed and moved passed him, "So, did you enjoy my little present?"

"Present?"

"Alfiti Algar, of course." Kao grinned at him, "Did you screw her yet?"

Wrodin's eyes widened and he paled, "What did you do to her?"

"Oh, nothing much." Kao giggled, "She was supposed to bring you straight here. But you impressed her by knocking out that soldier. She got a little hot. Did you not sleep with her?"

Wrodin ground his teeth, "No. Mortals have more barriers than that."

"Pity." Kao yawned, "She seemed like she'd be fun, but I'm spoken for. She deserves a god, but everyone else are total jerks. At least you'd be kind to her."

He wasn't kind. Knowing him wasn't a kindness to anyone. This was Kao. The goddess of chaos, even if she no longer wore that title. She twisted the 'verse around her without a care, without understanding the full impact her actions might have. She created the 'verse. Her will was always righteous, even if you didn't agree with it.

Kao pouted, "Get over yourself, Wrodin. You're my chosen champion. You are not just the hermit under the hill anymore. You can't afford to be. I gave you the opportunity to have some fun, because what's coming... Isn't. Tomorrow, we sign the treaty. A treaty between all celestials, old and new. Mortal and divine."

He frowned, "So I am included in it, then?"

"Yes." Kao nodded, "You would ordinarily be bound by the decree. Except that you're my champion, which disqualifies you. Call it a kindness."

It wasn't a kindness. It was a political move. If he remained outside the treaty, he would have the opportunity to act when the hands of the other gods were bound. Kao was preparing for the inevitability of all treaties. The inevitability that had caused Yio to reject her Fate heritage and become mortal, to try and save Eldrasa. There would always be exceptional circumstances, where champions were needed to act when a god could not.

He bowed his head, "As you wish."

"Wintry is the one who suggested it." Kao shrugged, "Kind of annoyed the others wouldn't let her come. So not being able to see memories of you rolling in the dirt with Alfiti is really disappointing. Can't you let me have some vicarious fun?"

Wrodin didn't know what to say to that. It was probably a trap. Or even worse, Kao might have been serious.

"The Marked just arrived at the stables." Kao frowned, "We just need to await the human delegation from Ozandius, and we'll be complete. There'll be a dinner tonight, to welcome all the guests. The king of Balavid has taken to bed, sick. His son, Aaron Vanadreer will be leading things. He's an angry, petulant child. However, he owes a life debt to you, and to Dyys. That should... Help."

Wrodin flinched, "The Marked... Wait. You resurrected the demon who saved the prince, didn't you? The traitor?"

"No." Kao shook her head, "I had no hand in that. She hasn't even been fully resurrected. A piece of her soul was preserved. Meria helped a mortal free it."

A lich. A fractured and shattered soul shoved back into the body it owned. It might be less obvious in the body of a Fury, but what remained would be corrupted. The soul would be more prone to outbursts, and would be subject to visions of insanity. The Fel would call to it, and eventually the will of the lich would give out, and they'd join the innumerable undead that were part of the Fel, across all worlds.

The Marked would be beyond upset.

"Only our champions are allowed to fight." Kao informed him, "We've all already agreed to this stipulation. Inside the palace walls, only the champions can do any damage."

"Who is the champion of the Marked?" Wrodin raised an eyebrow, "The conflicted Alexis?"

"No, he thinks she's dead." Kao replied with a shrug, "In fact, by all rights, she should be. She ran into a dwergaz that the mortal who resurrected Dyys released from two thousand years of captivity. No, the Marked chose another Fury. Constance."

"Bel." Wrodin shook his head, "What is her story, Kao? Why can she influence events the way she does?"

"Unclear." Kao said angrily, "I really wish I understood, but I don't. Belladonna is currently taking a shower. She's here, along with Dyys. They haven't been invited to the dinner, at my request. I thought we shouldn't cross that bridge until we have to."

Wrodin swallowed nervously, "All events are converging on the treaty. Understandable, but in the current climate..."

"Disastrous." Kao finished for him, "And so, little ex-god, you will be my instrument towards preserving the peace. The prince has to listen to you, and every one of the gods has to show some deference to the prince whose castle we're holding captive for the meeting. Anyway, get cleaned up. I'm not going to a state dinner attended by every celestial in existence with a hermit. Plus, it'll give you a chance to look nicer for Alfiti."

He understood why she was pushing that angle now. In her own clumsy way, Kao was trying to give both Alfiti and he a moment of happiness. A moment of happiness before the real chaos descended. These peace talks would not be peaceful. Even the presence of so many celestials in one place was likely to cause untold chaos. With the tensions in the city already running high, thanks to the calamity, having the supposed cause of the calamity in the city would be problematic.

"The High Priestess Shannon is here." Kao laughed, "So we have the actual cause too. She's the champion of Sarin."

He bowed and left, before Kao could drop any more horrifying truths on him.

Dyys

She fell backwards into the hay, grinning as Bel jumped in beside her, coming up with straw sticking out of her hair. Dyys plucked them out, one by one, “Well, we’ve finally found a quiet spot. So, what was so important?”

Bel rolled her eyes and swung her leg over Dyys, positioning herself on top. She put a hand on one shoulder, and smiled down at her hesitantly.

Dyys felt butterflies in her stomach, and swallowed, “Am I... Worth it, to you, Bel? You know any relationship with me ends in heart break, with one of us dead. There’s no way out of that. I’ve already died once.”

Bel signed angrily. She got it. “Exactly.”

Dyys smiled up at her, cupping her cheek, “I do not deserve you.”

Bel grinned and leaned forward, kissing her.

It felt so different, so strange. Bel was so much softer than any demon. Everything about her seemed soft. She almost felt like Bel was becoming a part of her. Her lips, her tongue dancing with her own. Even those brilliant and strong arms of Bel’s felt soft as they wrapped around her, holding her tightly. Dyys felt it bubble up from her chest like a growl, and she moaned.

She couldn’t help it.

Bel broke the kiss with a gasp of air, looking down at Dyys with surprise and more than a hint of lust. Dyys smiled at her, “You made me do that... I wonder. Can I make you do that?”

Bel flushed a crimson red, and Dyys rolled her over easily, pinning the woman to the hay pile and began to kiss softly at her neck. She felt Bel squirm beneath her, shaking. She ran her fingers along Bel’s back as she began to kiss lower. Her collarbone. Her chest. The edge of her shirt. Dyys looked up for permission, and saw Bel’s face contorted with bright red effort.

She smiled and placed a single finger against the top button.

Bel looked down at her with disappointment, as if wondering why she’d stopped. The woman gave her a tight-jawed nod and Dyys smiled as she began to slowly unbutton the shirt. Deliberate slowness. Teasing her. She’d been wanting this for a long time. She was going to take her time about it, and enjoy it.

Bel seemed to disagree. Her hands grabbed the edge of Dyys’ shirt and ripped it over her head. The woman stared in surprise at what she saw. Whilst Dyys looked mostly human, she didn’t look entirely human. Bel reached up tentatively, tracing the scales running around Dyys sides. She pulled back her hand in surprise and Dyys winced.

She took the hand, kissing and healing the cut finger slowly, “I might need to keep my shirt on.”

Bel bit her lip nervously, and then shook her head.

Dyys sighed, “You’re too soft. I don’t want to hurt you.”

A knee landed between her legs, and Dyys coughed in surprise. Bel glared at her. She’d made her choice. She wanted to have Dyys against her, just Dyys, at least this once. This first time.

She leaned down and kissed her. She let herself become consumed in the passion. Bel loved her for who she was. She took it all, the good and the bad. She wanted to own it all, the good and the bad. That was why Dyys had been so willing to give it to her, even before she knew Bel might feel something for her. She was willing to have Bel as her master, even if she wasn’t her lover.

Bel had made her wildest dreams come true.

There was a hiss, and Dyys reached down for her angry belt, pulling her tail, snake head and all, out of the way as Bel yanked down her pants. Her fingers traced more scales, but more cautiously. Dyys shivered as she felt the fingers pick their ways around the sharpened tiles of her skin, pausing in the small of her back.

Bel grabbed her and rolled her back. Dyys just sat and smiled, looking up as the woman finished pulling her own shirt off. The bra unsnapped and was tossed aside.

They heard a cough.

Bel went bright red, spinning around into the straw and covering her chest.

Dyys sat up with irritation, glaring at the soldier who had walked in and hadn't immediately walked out again. The man was a shade of crimson, and bowing, "I... I have a summons for Ladies Belladonna and Dyys, from the goddess Kru."

Dyys thought for a moment, and then smiled, mouthful of fangs, "Tell her to fuck off."

The soldier sprinted away.

Bel looked cautiously out of the hay, making a series of timid signs. Dyys shrugged, "She knew exactly what she was interrupting. She can wait."

The woman nodded nervously, and pulled Dyys towards her. The Fury smiled down at her, kissing her gently, "We're okay, Bel."

Bel

It took her a moment to get back into it. She was worried about Kru. The goddess was unpredictable, and unkind. She wouldn't take it well when the soldier delivered Dyys' response. Or she might just laugh. She didn't know. That was what worried her.

All the same, she finally had Dyys all to herself. The Fury was treating her delicately, like porcelain. Trying to slow down and enjoy the moment, but that isn't what Bel wanted. She wanted it all, right now.

She shivered as she felt Dyys' tail curl around her waist, holding the two of them together. Every touch of Dyys was like fire. The tips of her teeth burned her as she kissed the Fury. Her scales burned her where they touched her. Her fingertips burned as they ran across her skin. There was nothing else like this. It was too much for her to handle.

Bel grabbed Dyys' shoulders, shaking as her eyes watered and her back arched.

Dyys smiled down at her with those red glowing eyes of hers, smiling cheekily, "We're barely getting started."

Bel grabbed her hand and planted it firmly where she wanted it. Enough was enough. She wanted everything that Dyys could give her, and she wanted it now. She hated that she couldn't speak right now. Hated that Dyys couldn't hear the sounds of ecstasy echoing inside her own skull.

Dyys shimmied down, kissing her belly button as she began to unbuckle Bel's pants.

"A.. Apologies... Ladies..." The soldiers stammered nervously, "The goddess Kru insists -"

He was cut off as Bel snapped her fingers. Right now, she didn't care who she was pissing off as she knocked the man out of the stable with a wall of air. She was not letting anyone interrupt Dyys. Not now.

Dyys pulled the pants down with exaggerated slowness. Bel could feel the adrenaline shooting around her. She wasn't breathing steadily anymore, she was struggling to breathe at all. She was beginning to feel desperate. Her mouth contorted as she felt a soft kiss against her underwear.

"For fuck's sake!" Kru shouted, appearing in a blaze of black flames beside them, "Can you not take five minutes before -"

She stopped, staring at them both.

Bel raised an eyebrow. She wasn't feeling remotely that confident, but she couldn't exactly scramble away as Dyys continued to act like nothing at all was happening.

Kru closed her eyes, "Ash. Sorry. Goodbye."

Dyys let out a small giggle.

Bel hooked her fingers around her underwear, trying to get them out of the way. Dyys looked up at her, "Are you sure?"

She glared death down at the woman. Enough with the teasing already! She wanted what she wanted, and she wanted it now!

Dyys smiled, "As you wish."

Her pants and underwear appeared floating in the air, and Bel's eyes rolled back in her head.

Lilibeth

She blinked, shielding her eyes from the light, and then sat up, hand reaching for a sword belt that wasn't there. It wasn't just that she'd lost it when she was resurrected, she was naked altogether.

She held the sheet from the bed up around her. She recognised where she was. She'd spent many a long night planning battles in this room. It belonged to Aurili. Why hadn't she been delivered to her own bedroom? Or the barracks?

She looked over, seeing her familiar friend asleep at a desk, parchment beneath her head as she drooled openly. A quill had fallen from her other hand. She smiled, just watching. It was a familiar scene. Apart from the lying in naked part.

However, what she couldn't see in the room was any clothes at all, for her. She wasn't the same size as Aurili, which would make sneaking out difficult and awkward.

There was a blaze of black flames as a Fae burst into existence. Aurili jerked awake, and the creature breathed a sigh of relief. "At least you two aren't. Look, I'm the goddess Kru. Praetor Lilibeth, I'm aware that Meria has chosen you as her champion. As such, you'll be expected to attend tonight's dinner. I wanted to warn you. My own champion, is an ork. He is one of my closest friends, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't kill him, like you did the ork on the road."

Lilibeth nodded nervously, still holding the sheet for some modesty.

The goddess smiled tightly, glancing over at the tired praetor with parchment stuck to her cheek, "You two probably only have an hour to spare. What with showering and the royal dressmaker. Try not to waste it."

She vanished again, and Aurili pulled the parchment off with a small wince, "I wonder what she meant."

Lilibeth went crimson, "Seriously? Aurili?"

The praetor looked over at her with her white eyes, not understanding at first. A moment passed and then she blushed, "Wait. What!? I've taken a vow of celibacy, Kru!"

Lilibeth looked down, "She knows that. She just... Saw what I felt."

"Don't." Aurili snapped, "I know what you feel, Lilibeth. I know it. I... It's easier if you don't say it. I swore a vow, when I was lost in that cavern. I wouldn't have survived without Wrodin's help."

Lilibeth shrugged, "I know. I've never said anything. I respect you, Aurili."

"Oh, shut up." Aurili moaned, "Being nice about it doesn't help either. Wrodin is here, too, by the way. Not a god anymore. Though he is Kao's champion for the treaty signing."

"Treaty?" Lilibeth looked up, "Kao'el?"

Aurili nodded, "The gods are gathering for a new treaty. Some sort of... New pantheon is rising. They're trying to organise a peaceful transition of power. Maybe. Politicians are difficult... Wait. Meria'el chose you as her champion?"

Lilibeth shrugged, "Is it surprising? She chose me as her prophet, when you swore your vow to Wrodin. I'm close to hand, and I know Balavid and the palace. It seems a logical choice if you're expecting a fight."

The other praetor sighed, nodding, "Yes. I guess."

Lilibeth winced, "If Wrodin is no longer the god of war... Who holds your vow, now?"

"I am... Uncertain." Aurili shrugged, "A woman, he says. He has not told me her name, yet. He suggested that Kao knows. And she's not a goddess either, anymore... Though you wouldn't know it, the way the others react around her. But, yes. The vow is intact. I swore it to the god, not to the name."

That hurt more than it should have. She should be happy for Aurili, that she still served a god. That she got to meet the man she'd worshipped for so very long.

"Why am I naked?"

Aurili blushed, looking down, "Had nothing to do with me."

"Not an answer. Also, why your room?" Lilibeth insisted.

"Bloody gods." Aurili muttered angrily, "Kao insisted. Meria, too. They put you here, stark naked, and told me that if I wanted you to recover, I had to sleep beside you, for at least an hour. They got their bloody hour."

Lilibeth blushed, "They tried to make us... Sheesh."

Aurili rolled her eyes, "At least you were asleep for it."

"So manipulative." Lilibeth shivered, "Um... Can I get clothes now?"

"No."

She started, glaring, "Why not, praetor?"

"The royal dressmaker." Aurili sighed, "You're Meria'el's champion, Lilibeth. Which means you're going to tonight's state dinner. Attended by all the gods. The prince wasn't having you turn up in Balavidian armour. He's... Dressing you up."

"Fuck." Lilibeth complained, dropping backwards onto the bed, "A cute dress. I bet I can't draw a sword in it. I'm supposed to be a body guard."

"Worse." Aurili laughed nervously, "You'll be able to."

Lilibeth tried to picture a dress that wouldn't get in the way of fighting. All she could come up with was a skirt. That much exposed flesh was a risk, and she couldn't risk getting hurt when the other champions were things like orks. Or ex-gods. What would the prince know about combat equipment?

"I don't understand." Lilibeth shrugged, "How is a combat dress even possible?"

"By sucking for combat." Aurili sighed, "He didn't listen to me. It exposes calves, midriff, and back, whilst being nearly skin-tight."

Lilibeth shivered, clenching her fists, "I may as well be naked. Fuck."

"He has a sick imagination." Aurili agreed.

Lilibeth rolled over, "Where is my spare set of gear?"

"I'm not allowed to tell you."

Lilibeth glared, "But you are going to go get it, aren't you? Can't risk a guest like Meria'el being put at risk, can we?"

"I'm just a praetor." Aurili sighed, "He ordered me."

Lilibeth glared some more.

Aurili shook her head, “No. I am not going to become a crown traitor just because the skeevy prince wants to check out your legs.”

Lilibeth blinked in confusion, “Wait. This doesn’t seem like the prince’s idea. Did Carmichael fucking survive?”

Aurili breathed a sigh of relief, “I wasn’t supposed to tell you that. Gods. Yeah. He portalled back here when the rest of you got hit by some trap. It’s why I was ordered to go find you, to recover the prince’s body. Should have seen Carmichael’s face when I returned with the living prince.”

Lilibeth winced, grabbing her head as the world around her swirled. She was sitting in a dining room, speaking and laughing with Meria. She didn’t know how she could be so calm and casual around the goddess, but she was. There was food in front of them. Amazing food she hadn’t seen since before the calamity. This had to be the work of the gods.

Meria turned to her sadly, “You’re dead.”

Lilibeth flinched, “What?”

She stared at the ceiling. She couldn’t breathe. She was drowning. She was cold. She couldn’t hear. The world was just a blur, no matter how much she blinked, trying to focus. To stay alive. She had to stay alive. She had to.

She’d been killed by a spiderling, and lay bleeding out on the floor. Cold and alone, without any hope of surviving at all. She’d watched her blood run across the tiles, and into the joins she hadn’t even noticed were there. It had run outwards as a grid, revealing the path she should have taken, if she were to survive.

“Well. I guess if you survive the next few days you might get lucky.” She heard a voice, and looked up at a young Aurili, looking down at her with white eyes.

“You needed your skills. For what is coming. To survive it. Your tale isn’t over. It’s... Beginning.” She didn’t recognise the voice, and she couldn’t see a face. Just a woman in a cowl of some sort, like a priest or acolyte.

Meria appeared, smiling at her, “I’m happy to see you, Lilibeth.”

The praetor jerked around as she saw an injured Fury land atop the palace, creeping into the shadows. They were missing an entire leg, from what she could see. Even that weak, a creature like that posed a threat to the prince. Was this a warning?

“I’m giving you the opportunity to survive long enough to kill Hero.” A voice snapped, and Lilibeth whirled to face a Fate. The woman glared at her, “You damaged her, Hero.”

Lilibeth started to cry, holding her head at the pain. She found herself lying behind a shattered table, looking down at herself. She could see a fragment of wood had pierced her chest. Blood flowed out around it, tainted with some black. She could see a face reflected in the blood. It wasn’t hers. It was Aurili’s... And she was crying.

She screamed, curling into a ball as the pain overwhelmed her.

Alexus

She moved towards the capital. Her feet barely touched the ground as she shot through the air, running faster than most mortals could possibly move. Fast enough she had to allow the air to move through her so she wasn't crashing into it and reduced to a jog. She knew where he was. She knew what she wanted to do to him.

Her stumps were still regrowing, aided by whatever the dwergaz had pushed behind her eye. She was hopping, more than running. She wasn't in any condition to take on the Marked again. He was Hero. A mortal so terrifying he'd managed to annihilate most of the Evening Realms by himself. He hadn't had magic in those days. When he'd butchered Fae for the simple crime of not being human.

He was the reason the Fae had withdrawn, had cut off ties with everyone. He was also the reason why the elfin had done the same. If it weren't for Hero, the worlds might be united. They might have a chance at a long lasting peace.

Now, the gods were gathering again. It had to be for peace talks. Trei and Kru couldn't continue to stand against each other. It would destroy the entire 'verse... But Hero would come among them. Untouchable, as the god of hell, but memorable to all Fae. Trei's bride was Summer. Queen of the Fae. She would know Hero. It was her sister, Luna, who put him in the ground. Now he had magic, and political authority. They couldn't simply kill him.

No government could reach out and annihilate a head of state, not without sparking off hundreds of years of hatred and conflict.

They needed someone like her. Someone outside of their political influence, who could turn up and kill the problem child. Could take the blame. She would gladly embrace it. She would allow herself to be imprisoned in the tenth circle of hell for eternity, if it meant that her Fury sisters could go free.

All she had was a knife, and the element of surprise. She'd need more than that to kill Hero. She'd need the luck of the gods. She'd need him distracted. She'd also need his access to magic reduced or cut off somehow. That was the only way she'd be able to get an even chance at this - and that was assuming she could fully heal before she took him on.

There were too many risks.

Chances were that she'd die, and he'd use it as an excuse to kick off a war against the mortal realm. More deaths to power his magical storehouses. She needed to take it slow when she got to the palace. She needed someone there, with an understanding of the politics, to help her.

Kregstad.

She was going to have to ask Kru for help, which meant that Kru would get what she wanted. She would get her.

Wrodin

His face itched, as he lay back in the steam of the bathhouse, soaking in the water. The beard hadn't been salvageable. He'd lived too rough a life, and he couldn't have something that smelled that bad attached to him as he walked amongst the gods... Again.

Well, that was part of his reasoning. The other part was the lingering voice of Alfiti. He couldn't get her out of his head, and it was infuriating him. Kao had set him up, and he'd taken the bait. The worse part was, he couldn't help but wonder if he had kissed her back what would have happened. It wasn't a terrible image. Alfiti might be brutal and headstrong. She might walk around like everyone else was worth less than her... But he deserved everything she'd said to him.

Everyone else walked around on eggshells, trying not to blame him. Alfiti didn't. She was honest. It made her seem adorable to him. A tiny elf, unafraid to cause the 'verse to piss down on her. She'd dance in the rain, as she cut down whoever was sent to kill her. She was brilliant. Indomitable.

If he was still a god, he might consider granting her sainthood.

Except, he wasn't. He was just a man. A man who had just discovered what it felt like to have someone care about you, and he wanted more of it. He didn't deserve it. Not at all. He deserved to be hated, to be shunned and attacked. To be thrown to the wolves. Any number of executions would be fitting... But none would be enough to make up for what he had done.

He didn't deserve to soak in hot springs, whilst awaiting a feast. Especially not whilst the countryside starved. Whilst children died of thirst. This world was in the toilet. It was circling the drain as a slave poured out the waters, trying to clean it away. The gods were here, but none of them would be helping. Their thoughts would be on themselves, and the far future. They wouldn't care about a minor rebellion. It would just be an amusing distraction.

That was why they'd chosen Balavid instead of Ozandius or Mishia or even Falenthia. They'd chosen a backwater kingdom that could be wiped out and nobody important enough would care. The deaths of everyone in the kingdom was an acceptable price for the treaty signing.

He heard a soft splash as someone else entered the springs, "You look good without the beard. Though, you didn't have to get rid of it."

"Yes, I did." He winced, not daring to open his eyes, "Did Kao send you?"

"She would have." Alfiti agreed, "But she didn't have to. Do you know how long it has been since I've been able to sit in a hot spring? Not since Yggdrasil died. That's almost a year and a half."

Two years since the fall of Eldrasa. Two years as a mortal. He was surprised he'd survived this for as long as he had. It had taken him a full year to come to terms with what mortality meant. That it came with insurmountable guilt. He would never forgive himself for his actions. He'd never be able to justify what he'd done as a god to his mortal self. It wasn't possible.

"You're not a champion, are you?"

"Nope." Alfiti answered, "I don't get to come to your uppity dinner, tonight. So I guess Kao won't be able to... What is she doing? With you and I? She's doing something. Isn't she?"

Wrodin sighed, looking over at the elf, and then looked away in surprise. There had been a reason he had his eyes shut. "Kao... Suggested we should... Fornicate."

She was silent for a moment, before bursting out laughing. "You? And me? That's..." She

broke off into a hysterical fit of laughter again. He could hear her struggling to breathe as waves of laughter hit her. It wasn't doing much for his confidence. He'd been hoping for a rejection, he thought, but not like this. This actually hurt. Was he so appalling a figure?

"Sorry..." Alfiti gasped for air, "But that's... Even when you were a god... That'd be a no."

She tumbled back into laughter, as Wrodin slowly wondered if a mortal could die of embarrassment. The elf continued to laugh, a sound like glass moving in the wind. Usually it would move a mortal. Enrapture their heart, make them spellbound. However, the particular mortal was too busy sinking into the water and wondering if drowning would be a more pleasant experience.

The elf wiped tears from her face, "Thanks. I think I needed that."

He shrugged, too embarrassed to say anything. Yet, there were a couple pieces of the puzzle that now refused to clink together in his head. If Alfiti hadn't even considered them together, why had she been teasing him? The kiss. Elfin didn't give away kisses lightly, thanks to a particular promise by F'rir given to each elf at birth.

Why had she said she would have come here anyway? Why would she have come into a spring, knowing he was there, naked, if she didn't think much of him at all? Was she trying to punish him somehow? If she was, it hadn't been effective. Unless the punishment was the confusion he'd be feeling for the next hundred years or so every time he thought back to this.

Wrodin sighed, coming up and leaning back so he could stare at the ceiling, "So, why did you want to come here, then?"

"To see how hot you were, all cleaned up."

A wet hand smacked into his face loudly. Alfiti burst into giggles, "Sorry. That's too easy. You're easy to fluster. That's basically why."

She enjoyed teasing him. That was why she was torturing him, because she liked the way he reacted to it.

It dawned on Wrodin then and there, and he let out a soft sound of irritation. Alfiti didn't realise it. She didn't actually know why she found it so fun to tease him, to twist him up and watch him get flustered. He'd seen this story play out too many times not to recognise it, but she... Hadn't. She didn't know that she actually liked him in some way. Despite the laughter. She might not have considered him as a partner... But she might actually want it.

Kao was trying to skip the awkward years of the two of them slowly growing close. She was trying to force them into a relationship, before either of them were ready for it. Wrodin didn't really know how to have a relationship. He'd never had one, as a god. He'd had plenty of worshippers willing to throw themselves at him for a night or two. He'd never sought out companionship, because as a god, he didn't have an equal.

That story had changed. Now he was a nothing.

He looked over slowly at Alfiti, and her ears went pink, "What?"

Wrodin laughed, and then looked back at the ceiling. He felt a surge of water, and hard hands against his chest. He blinked in surprise, seeing Alfiti floating there and glaring at him, "Out with it, Wrodin."

"You've never had a partner before, have you?"

She glared, and then sighed, "No. Why?"

“This...” Wrodin winced, “Yeah. Anything I say here is a trap. Kao’s trap. Try not to hit me.”

Alfiti pushed off him, and sat in the water, glaring at him, “I’ll consider it.”

“You teased Kyrus the same way.”

Her eyes widened, and she blinked slowly, “Eiden. Oh... Crap. Crap. Crap. No. I was laughing at you. I... There’s no way that I... I wouldn’t... You aren’t even...”

She didn’t finish her thought. She shot out of the water, diving for a towel, and ran into the changing room.

He wasn’t sure if he was supposed to follow and try and calm her down or reassure her... Or if he was supposed to pretend that none of this had happened.

Dyys

She snuggled next to her, holding her gently against her, wishing she could drift off to sleep as easily as Bel had. She didn't want to be lying here thinking about everything that could go wrong in the next few days.

There was a cracking sound, and she suddenly found herself on soft sheets, in a bed, still holding Bel. A blanket was lying across the both of them, and their clothes were in two piles on the dresser across the room.

She looked over cautiously, and saw a tired, pink-haired woman sitting comfortably at the edge of the bed, facing away from them. She whispered, trying not to wake Bel, "Sarin?"

The Fate nodded, stretching, and stood, "I've been giving it some thought. Shannon would be a decent champion, but she's a better politician. Kao's changed her mind. She wants Wrodin now, not Lilibeth. That means that the four of you don't have a huge purpose here. Protecting Alexis from the Marked is going to be difficult. The easiest way would be to make her my champion. But if I do that, he'll undoubtedly send Constance to kill her. You might be able to talk her down."

Constance was a hunter, like Alexis. She wasn't as brash as the other Fury though. She was considerate. If she killed something, she'd already thought through the process and accounted for most of what that something could do. It made sense for the Marked to choose her as champion. She was an incredibly skilled opponent.

Dyys frowned, "Won't that let the Marked know I exist? Make me a target again?"

"Probably." Sarin shrugged, turning to face her, revealing her endless black eyes, "But not as much as you might think, Dyys. Everything relies on Bel, and what she chooses, because it has to be her choice. Shannon made the choice to remain human. I have no idea what choice Bel will make. The 'verse will still make her choose, though."

The Fury wasn't sure what Sarin was meaning. She hadn't understood quite a lot of what the Fate had said. Yet, she suddenly felt very protective of Bel. Felt like her mistress was in incredible danger, an unavoidable danger. "How do I help her?"

"By being you." Sarin shrugged, "By staying alive. Time will tell how things turn out. In the mean time, Kao rejected your attendance of the gala tonight. Unfortunately, she's been overruled. You and Bel will be attending. Expect the Marked to be... Furious."

The Fate vanished, and Dyys lay there, feeling the comforting warmth as Bel tiredly snuggled into her. Except, they didn't have the time to lay here like the 'verse was waiting on them. Not if they were supposed to join gods for a meal.

She sighed and kissed Bel's cheek.

The woman scrunched up her face, "No... The sun's not up..."

"Yes, it is." Dyys laughed, "And we have work to do."

"Bugger off." She moaned.

Dyys slipped her arm out, and Bel came awake instantly. She rolled over, and grabbed her hand, "Dyys?"

"We have work to do." The Fury said sadly, and Bel pouted, "Work? Aren't we nobody's? I mean... I kinda thought we were waiting for the prince to thank you, and then we could walk away."

"We've been invited to the ball." Dyys shrugged, "Not quite sure why. Neither of us is a

champion. But Sarin invited us.”

Bel looked around, “She bring us here, too? Or was that you?”

“Sarin.” Dyys laughed, sitting up, “I have no idea where we are.”

Bel stood up, and then shot back under the blanket and complained, “Its cold.”

Dyys rolled out of the bed, her tail tucking around her waist as she wandered over to the clothes. She wasn’t cold. It wasn’t really something she had to feel. Her scales had flattened to keep in the warmth. She glanced over at Bel, and at the red already appearing on the white sheets. “Um... I think my scales scratched you.”

Bel blew a raspberry, and then paused and touched her throat. “Dyys. Why can I talk? And why do I know how?”

Dyys stared at her in surprise, “I don’t... Why wasn’t I surprised?”

Bel screwed up her face, signing angrily. A sign that Dyys knew by now. “Bloody gods.”

They didn’t stop to think before modifying Bel. Changing her as if she hadn’t been good enough the way she was. As if this was somehow better. As if taking her identity wasn’t a crime. Whilst it was true that Bel’s disability had got in the way every now and then, it was cruel to change her. Especially without giving her the choice.

Dyys picked up the clothes, bringing them over, “You don’t have to talk, Bel. Not if you don’t want to. Never again.”

Bel plucked a broken strand of hair, “You know that’s not true. The gods did it. Which means they want me to talk for some reason. Probably this damn dinner. I cannot believe they’re having a feast.”

Dyys started putting Bel’s shirt on her, and doing up the buttons, “They’ve always tended to be the selfish kind of creatures. When you’re literally the reason the sun shines, it isn’t surprising you think glory shines out your ass.”

Bel stopped her, “Dyys. You don’t have to do this. You’re not my servant. Not a slave.”

Dyys kissed her cheek, “I am your servant. Please don’t say that again. It is exactly what I want to be. What it means for a Fury to... How do I put this? This is a culture thing. Humans, do you say vows when you choose a partner?”

“Yes.” Bel signed, and then spoke, “At a wedding, usually. Man swears to protect and uphold his wife, wife swears to serve her husband as his equal.”

“Equal...” Dyys mused, “Furies don’t do that. Equality. I know I’m stronger and better than Alexis. I know I’m the most powerful of the Furies. We all know our hierarchy. When we choose a partner... The stronger Fury swears to serve the lesser Fury. Its a symbol, but more. We don’t have to serve them. Its... Love. That’s why we would.”

Bel nodded slowly, “You serve me, because you know you’re stronger, in almost every way?”

Dyys shrugged sheepishly.

Bel kissed her nose, “You’re still my equal, Dyys. I love you too much for anything else. But if that means you want to show me by dressing me... I’m not going to argue.”

It wasn’t precisely what she wanted to hear. Yet, Bel had dominated her a few times before. She’d ordered her without speaking. That was a show of love that Dyys could understand. Equality wasn’t, but maybe it should be. The Furies had come from this world once. Lived alongside humanity.

Maybe the obsession of hierarchy in their culture was something that Hero had come up with. Maybe it should die.

Dyys ran a hand down Bel's back, healing the various cuts and scratches, "We're going to have to work out what to do about this. I can't just heal you every time... We..."

Bel giggled, a sound that made Dyys feel dizzy. "We'll get there. I mean, you worked out what I liked, without being able to hear me. We can make this work."

Dyys smiled at her, "Wasn't too hard. Making you turn red is... Fun."

Bel put a hand around her neck, "Do you think we have the time?"

"No." Dyys replied, and let Bel pull her onto the bed, "But I don't care."

Bel

She pulled on her boot, and Dyys crouched in front of her, doing up the laces.

It wasn't quite her clothes. They were similar, but it still wasn't what she'd been wearing. The interfering hand of the gods again. Her shirt was now silk, and tucked. Designed to accentuate her chest, and the neckline was lower too, but still modest. Probably to try and make some handsy god oggle her, rather than question why she was even allowed at the dinner.

She didn't know why she was expected to come to the dinner. She was human, and useless. Dyys, yes. Absolutely. Meria and others had expressed an interest in Dyys. Kru had. But Bel?

Kru had sort of expressed an interest in her, but then Kru was the one who'd asked that Bel be banned from coming to the dinner, and then got overruled. Which would probably make Kru pissy that Bel was interfering in her plans again. It wasn't her fault. The 'verse just shoved her around, and she tried to cope with it.

She stood up, and looked at the both of them. No amount of small tweaking to their clothes would make them presentable for this. They were very clearly commoners. Peasants. Ants to the gods. Even Dyys, with her tail wrapped around her waist, looked like little more than a hedgewizard. Which is sort of what she was when Bel met her, so it made sense.

She shrugged, and walked over and opened the door, and froze as she saw a dozen guards instantly salute. She felt Dyys hand find her own, and the Fury led her through the crowd of soldiers confidently. They moved off in a direction, but Bel had no idea if it was the right one, or if they were still pretending to be confident.

Dyys smiled at her, "I can smell food. This way."

That made perfect sense. Though they might be headed to the kitchens, rather than to the dining hall.

A soldier saluted as they passed, "Lady Belladonna, Lady Dyys."

Bel turned towards him, "Are you expecting me?"

The soldier saluted again, "Yes, m'lady. Behind me lies the great hall. I am ready to announce you, if you are ready to join the others."

Dyys rolled her eyes, "Announced. Oh yay. This is going to be fun."

Bel squeezed her nervous hand, though her own heart was racing. She didn't want to be announced. Didn't want to have a couple dozen gods turn and look at her and wonder why the fuck she was even there.

She nodded, "I am ready."

The soldier stepped through, and they followed. They appeared atop a grand staircase, which seemed to only serve the purpose of introducing people to a crowd waiting at the bottom of it and nothing else at all.

"Lord, ladies, gods, goddesses, and other celestials!" The soldier projected, "May I present Lady Belladonna of Cherkevand, from Balavid, and Lady Dyys of the city of Dirae, from the Tenth Circle of Hell."

The crowd below turned to acknowledge them, and the murmuring stopped. Dyys whispered in her ear, "Now we walk."

The two moved down slowly in lockstep. With each step, Bel felt like she might stumble or fall.

There were too many eyes watching her. Too many people. She hadn't expected so many, and she knew every single one of them was so far above her on the foodchain she might as well not exist at all. Why were they paying her any attention? She didn't mean anything.

She paused at the bottom of the steps, trying not to blush or look around nervously. A nearby man drifted over to her. Well, he looked like a man. Almost. Apart from her feeling like she was suffocating as he came close, his eyes were different. They were black, but not empty. She saw something there. Something... Endless. Eternal. Like the place she'd learned magic.

He bowed, "Ladies. I am Trei, King of the Fae."

Dyys laughed, "And head of the new godly pantheon."

Bel squeaked, and gave a short and nervous bow. Trei grinned at her, "Its fine, Bel. That is what you prefer to be called, isn't it?"

She nodded. She couldn't do much more. Her throat was suddenly raw, and her hands too nervous to make a sign.

He shrugged, "Sarin really should have asked permission before giving you vocal chords. That was mean of her. None of us would have struggled with sign. I guess she thought she was helping. Come find me tomorrow, before the negotiations, and I can teach you... Well, I can show you how to make them go away again, if you want, and how to make people understand sign, whether they want to or not. Again, only if you want. For now, let me introduce you to someone else."

He waved at a nervous couple. They were dressed in long and plain white cloaks, of rough linen. Bel was surprised to see such poor clothes in a place like this. Trei smiled, "This is Sarin's High Priestess Shannon, of Ozandius. And her Head of Discipline, Antoinette."

They both curtsied to them, and Bel bowed, signing a hello with one hand, her other firmly gripping Dyys.

Shannon's grey eyes sparkled and she frowned, "You really are a Fury, aren't you? Sorry. I haven't met many demons."

"Not a demon." Dyys snapped, and Bel felt like she might suddenly have to step between them.

Antoinette rolled her green eyes, "She's not trying to insult you, Lady Dyys. We're from Ozandius. I don't think many of your kind have even come to the mortal plane, let alone all the way to a dying kingdom."

Dyys relaxed, "I'll take that as an apology. In a way, you're close. But not at all. Before I lived in the Hall of Hells, I lived in a place that I believe you now call Solas."

Shannon blinked in surprise, "The Faen ruins. Are they Fae?"

"Yeah." Dyys shrugged, "But others lived there too. Like any other city."

Bel looked sideways at her, signing quietly, "And how old are you, Dyys?"

"Rude." Dyys replied with a laugh, "Bel asked my age. I've been... Vague with her. Rude, I know, to keep something like that. I'm a bit embarrassed. I'm sure you two have enough embarrassing secrets."

Both sisters went white, and Shannon stepped closer, whispering, "The Temple doesn't currently approve of same-sex relationships."

Bel scratched her head, signing, "What?"

Antoinette shrugged, “We’re trying to change it. The wheels of politics move slowly. So long as we’re not overt, the others let it go. Mostly because everyone is batshit scared of Shannon.”

Dyys frowned, “Yeah. That’s one Bel doesn’t know, yet.”

Shannon looked at the ground, like she was about to burst into tears, “I . . . I’m to blame. Bel. I caused the calamity.”

She felt her hands clench into fists before she knew what she was doing, and then she slowly released her breath, trying to calm herself. She used her new vocal chords quietly, “So that’s why Trei wanted me to meet you. He wanted me to realise there was a human behind this. Someone who is sorry for what happened. To take away any target I might have. Trying to make me let go of hate.”

Shannon smiled at her weakly, “I’m sorry. I . . . I don’t know what else I can say. It lives with me. It always will live with me.”

Bel shrugged, and glanced sideways, “If you hadn’t, I wouldn’t have met Dyys. She was healing damage from the calamity when she came to my farm.”

That was when she realised she was talking to a High Priestess and had just casually told her she was a farmer, or less. Which was incredibly embarrassing. Shannon though, seemed to latch onto something else, “Healing it? How? My methods haven’t been effective. We’ve been researching, but getting nowhere.”

Dyys smiled shyly, “Well, it gets harder as you get closer to Ozandia. So I don’t know if it’ll work, but I’ve been using a creation spell.”

Antoinette nodded slowly, “Elemental cogenesis. I’ve been dabbling in it, but there aren’t that many mages still alive in Ozandius. Finding someone skilled enough has been hard. Mostly we’ve been relying on demons that Shannon’s been summoning, but recently none of the summonings have worked.”

Dyys winced, “Yes. The Marked has been. . . Consolidating power.”

Bel put an arm around Dyys waist, trying to reassure her. Trying to remind her she wasn’t here alone.

Shannon grinned, “You two really are a cute couple. Though, I do have to say I wouldn’t want to meet you on a dark street.”

Antoinette punched her playfully, “Shannon. Diplomacy.”

Bel laughed and signed, “You’re probably right.”

She felt a small shock as Antoinette signed back to her, “She is right though, you’re totally cute.”

Dyys frowned, “I didn’t catch that.”

Shannon shrugged, “I never managed to pick up sign. Antoinette and Verity have been practising. Useful for conveying important information during a debate.”

Bel coughed, “Sorry. I was mute. Until today. I still . . . Prefer sign. Antoinette was just reiterating how cute we are.”

Dyys blushed.

Bel held up her wrist, the shining red strand around it glowing, “We’re not just cute, though.”

Antoinette stared, “That’s... A promise knot? Right? I’ve read a couple of history books that mention them. Don’t they... Mean that you can command a summon? Or something?”

“Almost.” Dyys grinned, “A symbol of master and servant. However, I don’t think that translates well. Closer to a wedding ring, or an engagement necklace. It is my vow to Bel.”

Shannon almost squealed, and hugged her. Bel was taken completely by surprise, and the High Priestess grinned at her, “I’m so happy for you. I don’t know what to say.”

Dyys squeezed her, and Bel could feel her radiating. She’d surprised the Fury, by showing just how proud she was of her. Proud of the connection they had. She wouldn’t hide it. Ozandius wasn’t that far from Balavid. Same sex relationships were still a taboo here, but she wasn’t about to hide it. Especially not when surrounded by celestials who were willing to bed just about anything that could breathe. And some non-breathing things too.

Antoinette grinned, “When two people say they care about each other, and step up, the world becomes... Something better. For everyone.”

Bel just blushed at that. She reasserted herself, “So, you’re part of Sarin’s party, then? Her champion?”

Shannon shrugged, “I’m not sure, really. I think I was going to be champion, but I think someone else will be, now. Not surprised. I’m mostly here to meet people, and get to know them. Being in Ozandia, I’m usually acting as a buffer between Sarin and Kru. And... Well... Kru doesn’t really like me.”

Antoinette laughed, “She’s being modest. Kru used the Fel, the full force of the Fel, in an attempt to kill Shannon. And Shannon managed to stop it, hold it at bay, and then cure Kru of the Fel.”

Bel shook her head, “That’s amazing. You held your own against a god.”

“I had a reason to live.” Shannon said, glancing at her companion.

Bel decided that she really wanted to see Shannon kiss Antoinette openly. To see these two feel a little more relaxed about themselves. She also decided she liked Shannon. She wanted to hate her for what she’d done, but she couldn’t. Shannon had her reasons for doing what she had, and they were both trying to fix it.

“There is something about the calamity.” Bel said, furrowing her forehead, “I cured one of the stones recently. There was corrupt magic inside, leaching into the soil, and into the magical matrix.”

Antoinette nodded, “The Fel. We don’t know how it got there. It wasn’t there when the calamity hit. Not at first. It took a few weeks for the Fel to start showing up. Kru assures us she has had nothing to do with it. That she isn’t using the Fel anymore.”

Dyys frowned, “There is someone else who touched the Fel. Asos-”

Shannon put a hand to her lips, “Don’t say the name. But you’re right.”

Bel swallowed nervously. Apparently she’d chosen one of the heaviest topics of conversation that she could have. Probably not the wisest thing to do, politically, right before the meal. You were supposed to raise the heavy when people were tired, and full of good food.

Antoinette frowned, “Sarin is looking into it, coordinating with Trei. Lady Luna, from the Fae, is making decent headway. She’s the... Source of the Fel. All Fae are the source of magic. Different magics come from different Fae. The Fel is Lady Luna’s. She’s helping, but she’s also busy with life in the Evening Realms. We mostly correspond by mail.”

Mail to another realm. She wondered what the round trip on that one was like. Maybe it was faster. That'd make sense. The only way between the worlds relied on magic.

Dyys nodded slowly, "That makes sense. Have you met Yio?"

"She's a friend." Shannon grinned, "Did you want to meet her?"

Before Dyys could explain Antoinette had dragged a pink-haired woman away from a conversation and towards them. She was of average height, but didn't quite fit in with the crowd. She was wearing rugged, and battle-hardened, leather armour. An empty sheath lay across her back from where she was obviously forced to surrender a sword. She had the same black eyes as Trei, except in hers Bel could see something worse. Hatred was inside them. Consuming anyone who stared for too long.

Dyys bowed, "Lady Yio."

The woman waved, "Hey. Oh. Bel. Good to see you're alive. Did they announce you?"

"Yes." Bel swallowed nervously, "I'm please to meet you, Yio'al."

The woman shook her head, "Nah. I'm mortal. No need for the celestial honorific. So, you wanted to meet me, Dyys?"

She nodded nervously, and Bel found her hand. She could feel that Dyys' pulse was racing.

"I... Believe... You created the Furies." Dyys started nervously.

The pink-haired warrior shrugged, "Sure. As a race of Guardians, to defend the shrine of the mortal world. The Marked sort of hijacked you into his own little project. I had to resort to hiding the shrines."

Dyys winced, "I... Don't remember everything. I've been trying to piece together things. From before the Marked."

Yio blinked, "Holy shit. You're a runaway. Wow. Awesome. Also, you know the Marked is in this room, right?"

Dyys nodded without saying anything.

Bel was feeling just a tad angry. She wondered if she could hurt the Marked for everything he had done. Probably wiser not to.

Yio shrugged, "Well... I guess I should start from the top. I made three Furies. You all come from them. You're magic-infused because you're all demigods. I made a deal with Meria, to help make you. You're all female, which you might have noticed, despite the intermingling with other demon races. Furies can actually reproduce on their own. Your sex doesn't matter. You're also all warriors. You'll get really depressed if you don't get to kill something every now and then. So, most of your physical attributes revolve around that. The older you get, the more magic you have, the stronger you are. That was the basic idea, anyway."

Bel raised a hand timidly, "You said she can get pregnant? From me?"

Yio glanced between them and grinned, "Oh. Yeah. Um. Not quite. You're not really involved. You get her in the right mood, and her body will create the egg and fertilise it. Both parts are done by Dyys."

Dyys' face was bright red and clearly said she'd heard too much information. Unfortunately, Bel was fixed on one word in particular, "Egg?"

Yio looked over at Dyys, "Yeah. We'll move on after this, but she can lay eggs."

Shannon stepped in instantly, “Yio, you knew Bel, from before?”

The warrior shrugged, “I used to take care of the mortals. Getting Izak and Bel to hook up was a heck of a challenge. You both liked each other, but you were both incredibly stubborn about it. The whole village was jumping up and down before you kissed.”

Bel smiled weakly, “Thanks. I guess.”

“I just wanted to give you the chance.” Yio smiled, “Before the calamity hit.”

Shannon groaned, “I’m sorry. You lost Izak in it, didn’t you?”

Dyys squeezed her hand, and Bel just nodded.

Lilibeth

She stood at attention, at the end of the hall. She was trying to pretend to be a decoration, like any of the other soldiers dotting the room. It wasn't really working. The other guests... The gods... Kept glancing in her direction. As if they were trying to decide her place in things.

One of them approached her at length, "You're Meria's champion, aren't you?"

She nodded stiffly, "Yes, m'lord."

He waved a hand casually, "I'm a minor god. Qo will do. I was wondering, your eyes. I've only very rarely seen eyes like that. They're the eyes of a prophet, aren't they?"

Qo. The god of the rat plague. That was the man talking to her, dressed up in a perfectly tailored silken suit. That was kind of gross. "Yes, m'lord."

He smiled slowly, "Since events recently started, the future has been clouded to most of us. Do you care to share any insights?"

Lilibeth looked him up and down slowly, "Not really, m'lord."

He blinked in surprise, as if shocked she would refuse. He was a god and she was just a puny mortal. That was true, but she was also Meria'el's champion. Which meant not giving anyone else a leg up on her goddess.

She heard the jangle of silver bells, and saw Meria walking towards her. She breathed a sigh of relief, and saw the minor gods, Qo included, retreat to a safer distance. Meria smiled at her, putting a hand on one shoulder, "I'm happy to see you, Lilibeth."

She bowed stiffly, "Goddess."

Meria sighed and stood next to her, "You can try and calm down. Most of these people won't try and eat you. Today. Except maybe Qo, I guess. But he's easy to scare. How are things with you and Aurili?"

Lilibeth was caught off-guard. She hadn't expected the goddess to bring that up. "Her vow is intact, and belongs to whoever the new god of war is."

"Oh." Meria sighed, "Would you like to meet her?"

Lilibeth blushed furiously, "That... Wouldn't be... Appropriate..."

"Of course it would." Meria grinned, "That's what these gatherings are for. To make people owe each other. She's actually quite nice. Come on, she's over here."

Lilibeth didn't get a chance to protest, just dragged along by the goddess. She noticed the others move out of her way quickly. It made some sense. In Balavid, Meria was among the most worshipped of the gods. Just like Ozandius generally worshipped the Fates. That probably made Meria one of the stronger gods, on this soil.

Meria grinned, "Good to see you again, Belladonna. Dyys."

Lilibeth bowed to the two, and then to the three others. "Lady Yio."

Meria smiled, "This is Shannon, and Antoinette. Sisters of Sarin. Shannon pretends to be the High Priestess."

Shannon swallowed nervously, "Lady Meria."

The goddess indicated her, "This is Praetor Lilibeth, of the Second Legion. Her counterpart, Praetor Aurili, has a vow to the god of war. Which means, Aurili is yours, Shannon."

Lilibeth looked in confusion, and felt the others stare as well. Shannon muttered under her breath, and then smiled, "I refused the title. Apparently the 'verse doesn't care. It'll let me stay human and mortal, but still give me the godly responsibility."

Lilibeth nodded slowly, and then Meria embarrassed her, "Aurili's vow is one of celibacy."

Shannon burst into a grin as Lilibeth looked at her feet and wished the ground would swallow her up. "Can I meet her?"

The praetor shrugged slowly, "I believe she's on duty."

Shannon grabbed her hand, "Dyys, Bel. I'll talk to you later. This is important. This is fun."

Meria just laughed, her bell's dancing in her hair as Lilibeth was dragged away by the Priestess who was also a god. A god of war. How could someone dedicated to peace and healing be a god of war? It didn't make sense to her.

Shannon squeezed her hand, "Hey. No need to be so nervous. I was nervous too, when Sarin appointed me as High Priestess. I was not ready for it. At all. I was actually the lowest sister in the whole temple. But she saw what I could be, and decided I was going to be her thing."

Lilibeth shook her head, "I'm a soldier, and a prophet. That doesn't mean a god should be granting me requests."

"I'm not a god." Shannon insisted, "I'm... In between. Like Queen Summer, though I guess you don't know her. Compared to most people, I can do a lot. Compared to a god, I'm a nothing. I'm supposed to be part of the treaties, so they can't directly attack me, but that's about it."

Lilibeth nodded slowly, as Shannon paused by a soldier near the entrance staircase, "Would you fetch Praetor... Aurili, was it?"

She nodded, "Yes."

"Fetch the praetor for me, please." She smiled, "Lady Shannon is asking."

The soldier nodded and vanished, and Shannon turned to her, "So, how long have you liked her?"

"We nearly died in a dwergaz ruin together." Lilibeth said slowly, "There, she swore her oath to the god of war. To be their chosen instrument if they gave her the strength to survive. At the same time, Meria selected me as her prophet. We fought our way out, together. We were just auxiliaries at the time."

Shannon frowned, "That's... The lowest soldier rank, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"How old were you?" Shannon asked with concern, and Lilibeth shrugged, "Nine or ten. Does it matter?"

"A ten year old." Shannon shivered, "Facing down a dwergaz ruin, alone. That's horrifying."

"I survived." Lilibeth replied. She didn't really like how happy this young woman was. How bouncy she seemed to be, full of nervous energy. She especially didn't like how she was willing to grant a favour like this one without naming a price up front.

"What will this conversation cost me?"

Shannon blinked, "Huh? Oh. Nothing. I don't care. I kinda just want to see you kiss. That'd be fun. Ozandius is a bit... Backwards. So anytime..."

Lilibeth smiled slowly, “The sister you were with?”

“Yep.” Shannon grinned, “Isn’t she a looker? Antoinette always turned heads. She’s actually a bonafide princess. Princess Ariadne of Yurk, by birth. And I got her. . . Not that you can tell people. Please.”

Lilibeth shook her head. The priestess was far too excited. That secret must be the poorest kept secret in the whole of Ozandius. Though, knowing politicians, pretending not to know was enough that nobody would do anything.

“It is still a little taboo, here.” Lilibeth sighed, “And. . . Aurili and I have had this conversation. I don’t want her to forget her vow. I’m not going to make her do anything like that.”

Before Shannon could answer, the praetor in question arrived. She saluted, and noticed how nervous Lilibeth was looking with a scowl.

Shannon swallowed nervously, “Oh. Umm. . . I heard. . . You served the god of war.”

The praetor nodded slowly, “I have sworn a vow to dedicate my life to their service.”

“I’m the heir.” Shannon smiled weakly, “Ask around, and the others can confirm it. I’m not a god. But I have everything that was the god’s. It’s. . . Complicated.”

Aurili bowed slowly, “Then my service is to your glory, High Priestess.”

“No.”

Both praetors were surprised by the vehemity of the outburst, and Shannon sighed, “I hate war. Really. But it is in me. I caused the calamity, because I. . . I couldn’t see how to stop it. How to fix things. I’m going to live with that stain for the rest of my life. You shouldn’t be bound to someone like me.”

Aurili swallowed nervously, one hand on the hilt of her sword, “I’m a soldier. War is my purpose.”

“Find a better one.” Shannon glared, “You need to be better than this, Aurili. And I know you can be. The era of war is over. I’m not letting it out again. I won’t let war become a part of the new pantheon. I’m just a servant of Sarin, now.”

Aurili glared at Lilibeth, and she could see the tears there. The praetor had dedicated her entire life to this cause. Shannon was breaking her heart. Was ruining her beliefs about herself. What was right, and what was wrong.

Shannon sighed, “You needed your skills, Aurili. For what is coming. To survive it. Your tale isn’t over. It’s. . . Beginning.”

Aurili wiped her face quickly, and then sighed, “As you wish.”

“No.” Shannon smiled, grabbing her in a hug. “What I’d want isn’t what you want. So you be the best you there can be, and we’ll call it even.”

With that, the priestess wandered away, leaving Lilibeth speechless.

Aurili glared at her, “What was that?”

“Meria’el’s idea.” Lilibeth breathed nervously, waiting for the inevitable onslaught.

Aurili stood next to her slowly, “You know, I never thought I’d say this. Not when we’re both chosen instruments of the gods. . . But fuck the gods. Seriously.”

Lilibeth laughed nervously, hoping not too many around them had overheard.

Aurili elbowed her, “Was Meria trying to hook us up?”

“Yep.”

Aurili sighed, “And you refused, didn’t you? You even asked the priestess not to?”

Lilibeth shrugged, “We’ve talked about this before. I’m not going to make you give up yourself. Ever.”

Aurili grinned at her, “Well. I guess if you survive the next few days you might get lucky.”

Her heart skipped, and she stared in surprise, the praetor grinned, “But obviously I can’t fraternise with one god’s champion. That would be disrespectful to the rest. So you’ll just have to wait to see if I’m serious, or still pissed at you.”

With that the praetor walked away, moving stiffly, holding her sword.

Lilibeth felt like she’d just missed an opportunity.

Or maybe she’d found one.

She didn’t know.

Alexus

The Fury landed softly atop one of the buildings. She scanned the defences, noting their extensiveness. Soldiers were positioned everywhere. She'd been lucky to find an opening. They were looking to the skies as much to the ground. A tired soldier had looked away for a moment, allowing her to leap into the shadows. Her next move would sound an alarm.

Humans were weak, but getting passed them and then finding the Marked would take enough time that they would be able to mount a considerable defence. She wouldn't be able to break through it on her own.

"Fucking finally!" A voice exploded behind her, and Alexis turned slowly, looking at the pink-haired woman who had appeared in shock.

The woman grinned, "Alexus. I've been waiting for you. I've selected you as my champion, so you don't end up dead. We're supposed to be at the dinner already. What kept you?"

The Fury twitched, "Champion? Sarin?"

"Yes." The Fate said with irritation and snapped her fingers. The world swirled, and the two of them were in a bedroom. White sheets, golden embroidered curtains. Sarin waved to two dresses laid out on the bed, "Get dressed. I don't really have time for this. We're running late."

Alexus sighed. The Fate wasn't giving her a choice. Just like the Marked hadn't given her a choice.

"I'm giving you the opportunity to survive long enough to kill Hero." Sarin snapped, "So stop pouting. I'm not your enemy. I've finished what Æpelred started. But please, put on a dress. I can't have you walking in as a hunter. The others are nervous enough about you."

Alexus held up her new hand in surprise, and then sighed. Celestials. Devastating injuries didn't mean much to them. They frittered away even the work of the dwergaz like it was nothing.

She turned to the bed, and looked at the dresses. They weren't the highest quality, nor the worst. A decent tailor, working in a hurry. She picked up the black dress, looking at it sparkle and sighed, "This, I guess."

"Put it on." Sarin said with irritation, "We're the only ones not down there. The others will be getting hungry."

Alexus stripped, and pulled the dress over her head, her tail curling around one of her legs. She spread her hands, "Happy?"

"Not in the least." Sarin sighed, "But that's nothing to do with you. You look stunning. Try and be stunning."

The Fate snapped her fingers again, and Alexis held her mouth to stop from throwing up. She found herself outside a doorway, in front of a soldier. Sarin smiled, "Go ahead. Announce us."

Alexus followed the Fate through, standing at the top of the grand staircase. She looked down, at all those eyes looking up at her, and realised how insignificant she was. Sarin was protecting her. Any one of the people down there was a match for her, and there would always be one of them not willing to stand by as she attempted to assassinate one of their number.

Politics had beaten her. Just like he had.

"Lord, ladies, gods, goddesses, and other celestials!" The soldier shouted, "May I present the Fate, Sarin, and her champion, Lady Alexis of the city of Dirae, from the Tenth Circle of Hell."

Few of the people below broke their conversations. Alexis could feel the buzz in the air. The impatience. These people weren't used to waiting, and she was the reason they'd been waiting so long.

Sarin took her hand, and began to descend, "No violence, Alexis. Everyone here has agreed to that. Self defence, or defence of me. That's all you can do, and an insult is not an attack. Is that clear?"

"Crystal." She replied. To be honest, she was too terrified to attack anyone, even in jest. These people were monstrous. They were the concepts and beliefs of every world, consolidated into petty, vindictive and cruel individuals with the power to unmake the 'verse.

A face moved into view at the bottom of the stairs, and Alexis faltered, almost falling.

Sarin steadied her, "He can't touch you. Not without inviting a full scale war. All of us against him. Even he is not that arrogant."

Alexis paused at the bottom step, as he blocked her way. He looked her up and down slowly, "Allowing gods to dress you now? What else? Shall you give birth to a demigod? Do you worship at the temple of her body?"

Alexis ground her fangs together, but Sarin replied, "You damaged her, Hero. I was hardly going to let that slide. This jealousy of you is not fitting. You tossed her aside like garbage, and I have polished her to perfection. Now get out of her way."

The Marked took a single step backwards, and Alexis stepped down, moving to walk passed him. He caught her wrist, "You're mine. You might shelter with Sarin for now, but you are mine, Alexis. Know it."

"She's not yours, ass." An irritated voice proclaimed, and Alexis shook him off, staring in shock.

The Fury approached slowly, her hand tightly wrapped in that of a mortal. Dyys grinned at her, "It is good to see you, Alexis."

Sarin moved away, and the crowd seemed to close out Hero as the three stood there.

She waved at the mortal, "I see your promise is intact. I'm not sure whether to congratulate you or question your sanity, Dyys. But then, you know more than I do about me, don't you?"

Dyys smiled and kissed the mortal on the cheek, "Bel is my master, Alexis. I would not have that change. Not for anything."

Alexis relaxed slightly, "Kru gave me my memory. Or a part of it... I went to go hunt him. He came for me, and showed me I'm a nothing."

Bel glared, "Hardly nothing, Alexis. Or he wouldn't have threatened you when you arrived. This is a diplomatic setting, and you are a representative of Sarin. He made a risk by greeting you the way he did."

Alexis blinked, "You can talk now, mortal?"

"Bel." Dyys snapped, "Call her by her name, Alexis. She's my master. Show some respect."

"Sorry." Alexis said, hesitating. "I... I thought I was coming here to die. I'm not... I have no idea what Sarin is planning."

Dyys shrugged, "So what's new? The gods are the gods."

Before she could say anything else, she heard a bell ring, and a soldier proclaimed, “Lord, ladies, gods, goddesses, and other celestials! Dinner, is served.”

Wrodin

Kao was still trying to screw with him. There was no way the seating plan was accidental. A seating plan that placed an enormous ork by his left hand, and Alfiti by his right, whilst across from them were the two Sisters of Sarin desperately trying to pretend they weren't completely obsessed with each other.

He would have found the sisters amusing, if it weren't for Alfiti's hand lying on his thigh. He still didn't know if she was teasing him or not. If she'd managed to sort out what she thought of him in her own head. He had a feeling if he raised the topic he'd be eviscerated with another burst of laughter.

"You don't have time to hesitate." Kao whispered in his ear, and he wondered where the formless goddess-who-wasn't-a-goddess was. She could be anywhere, really.

Alfiti turned slowly towards him, "Did you hear that?"

Wrodin nodded uncertainly, but the ork beside him shrugged, "I heard nothing, elfin."

He glanced at the sisters, and Shannon shrugged.

Wrodin looked down at her hand. Alfiti pulled it back slowly, "Damn. Here I am trying to work things out, and Kao is her usual pushy self."

He turned to her, and smiled softly, "If we survive the treaty signing, would you consider going out on a date with me?"

It was the easiest way he saw to make Kao back down, whilst still maintaining control of the situation. He could put it aside until everything was over. It wasn't like he had significant plans for himself for when this was all said and done. He was attracted to the elf. She was fierce, loyal, and an intimidating opponent. Her warrior skills were second to none, and her intelligence gave her an edge few opponents realised in time.

Alfiti stared at him in surprise, unable to say anything. She really hadn't expected him to come out and say anything.

Mo'ktar, the ork, turned around slowly, frowning, and said the most inappropriate thing he could for the setting, "Didn't I kill you, elf?"

Antoinette flicked a pea with her spoon, catching the ork in the nose. He shook his head in surprise, distracted from the conversation happening beside him. Shannon smiled innocently as the ork tried to piece together what had happened.

Alfiti swallowed slowly, "You don't take no for an answer, do you? Last time it was funny. Not so much, this time."

That hurt. Felt like being stabbed in the gut. Why was she so mean to him? When she showed every single sign of interest. Was she possessed? Were there two women in the one body?

Shannon sighed heavily, "Oh come off it, Alfiti. You've been staring at Wrodin since we sat down. Just because you're scared to take the step doesn't mean you need to insult him. You wanted him to ask, and he did. He took the first step."

The elf glared at the priestess, her ears turning a bright red and pulling back. Shannon met her gaze with one of boredom.

Alfiti's shoulders collapsed, "Kru's forbidden it."

Wrodin blinked in surprise, "What?"

“Idiot.” Alfiti growled, and then sighed, “After I ran off... Before... After you... Said stuff... I went to Kru. She’s my goddess, afterall. I asked her how I should handle things, and she absolutely forbid me from having anything to do with you. She said it’d make things easier, in the long run.”

Wrodin frowned, “Kao and Kru are both doing the same thing, in their own ways. They both foresee some looming disaster, though I don’t know what it is, and I doubt they have a clear picture of it, either. Kao thinks we should skip the foreplay. Experience what we can, whilst we can. Kru... She wants to protect you. From the hurt. Because if I am completely honest, I don’t foresee myself surviving any major conflict involving the gods. I’m a mortal. Weak, and slow.”

Alfiti smiled slowly, “That sounds about right. So... What should I do?”

Wrodin shrugged, “If we don’t survive the treaty, then you won’t have had to realise I’m a jerk. So why not go for the delayed date?”

Alfiti glared at him, “I already know you’re a jerk, Wrodin. You were a god. Do you remember this little place called Eldrasa?”

“Always.” He said and nodded, turning back to his meal.

A fork entered his hand.

He groaned, eyes watering, and turned back, “You weren’t done?”

“No.” Alfiti said, twisting the fork in place. He bit his tongue to stop from screaming, and Alfiti stood up, leaning in to him. Glaring at him as she met his gaze. He wondered if she’d made up her mind to kill him.

She kissed him. Her mouth met his, and Wrodin felt his anxiety suddenly wash away. The pain in his hand became a background throb, as her arms moved around his neck, and he felt her wrap her legs around him, pinning his arms by his side.

Alfiti pulled back, breathing hard, “If you break my heart, I break it. Agreed?”

He didn’t get a chance to work out what she meant as she kissed him again. He couldn’t think about anything. All he could feel and see was the elf. This perfect creature who had decided he was actually worth something, despite everything he had done. He did not deserve this. He didn’t deserve her. But she wasn’t giving him a choice. He wasn’t given the option to refuse her.

She was everything.

Then she screamed, as the world around him exploded into noise. He tore his hand from the table, grabbing Alfiti and dragging her down behind his chair as it turned to sawdust. The table exploded. He saw shrapnel and blood flying. He saw bodies falling as his ears rang with the explosions.

He cradled Alfiti beneath him, looking down with concern as she coughed weakly, blood spilling from her mouth.

She was dying.

If it was the other way, she could have brought him back. The gift of the elfin kiss, but like this. He couldn’t bring her back. If she died, it was over. Wrodin screamed as he reached out, touching the lifestream. He shouldn’t, he couldn’t. Not as a mortal.

His skin instantly vaporised into the air. His clothes turned to ash and disappeared. The magic hurtled through him and he sprayed blood into the air, but he took the magic burning him out, and twisted it to his will. His purpose.

The magic felt wrong. The lifestream felt wrong. This wasn't a light shining so brightly it burned up anyone who got too close. This wasn't the matrix that bound together all living things, bound them as one. This was a raging torrent of hatred, screaming and burning everything because it was all it knew. This was the Fel.

Alfiti would not die.

He would not allow it. He forced the magic towards the elf. He gave it life, commanding it to save her. To do whatever was necessary to keep her going. To keep her in this world.

The world began to fade from his vision, and he felt the magic slip away as he tumbled to the side. He could see her, through his fading eyes. He could see her blue eyes staring sightlessly towards the ceiling.

Dyys

She hit the ground, protecting Bel as she felt the shrapnel hit her, piercing her soft flesh where it wasn't protected by her scales. She flipped the table upright with her tail, grabbing a steak knife with one of her hands, as she cradled the woman. She could already see the red bleeding through the front of Bel's shirt.

She looked up cautiously, towards the source of the explosions. It was a woman. A Fae. Her wings were drenched and dripping with black dust. Her eyes were hollow and empty, void of colour. The woman was knocking aside divine attacks like they didn't even exist, and countering with astonishing blows that tore at the very fabric of nature itself.

Dyys dropped the knife, curling around Bel. She couldn't fight this. They were just being hit by the side-effects, and it would kill them. She held Bel, but she didn't dare to look at her face. Not whilst she could hear the ragged breathing. Hear the liquid pooling in Bel's lungs. She was healing her as fast as she could, but it wasn't enough. For every puncture she healed, another three opened up into massive tears. Bel had taken the brunt of one of the explosions. She might be a little more than mortal, but only a little.

Bel grabbed the sides of her head, forcing her to look at her. Dyys could feel the blood running down her cheeks as Bel stared up at her, and mouthed the words inside the storm of sound.

"I love you."

Dyys bit her lip, trying not to cry as she repeated the words back, "I love you."

The blue eyes rolled up into her head, and Dyys let loose an angry howl of anguish. She felt her pain boiling over into rage. The ground around them blackened and the table's ruins burst into flames.

She laid Bel down on the ground gently, and then she stood up. The debris around her shot out of her way, and she began to walk towards the intruder. She felt her skin torn away, her muscles tear. She felt her bones break as she stepped towards the maelstrom.

It was all she could do to continue to move towards the woman with the forces flying out from her. The closer she got, the harder it got to move. Her feet shattered the ground as the pressure tried to flatten her.

She was a Fury. She was not beaten so easily.

Dyys grabbed the woman's wrist, as her arm was stripped back to nothing but bones. Even those exploded into dust as she gripped the wrist. The woman didn't even turn, didn't even acknowledge her presence, as Dyys vanished.

Everything that made up the Fury was destroyed.

Lilibeth

She stared at the ceiling. She couldn't breathe. She was drowning. She was cold. She couldn't hear. The world was just a blur, no matter how much she blinked, trying to focus. To stay alive. She had to stay alive. She had to.

She couldn't move.

Something had hit her, and then everything was gone. Everything was just this chaos.

She could hear someone nearby, just a dull sensation that they might be talking. It didn't matter how much she strained, she couldn't hear them. She was too far gone. She'd felt like this only once before.

In the ruin, as a child soldier.

She'd been killed by a spiderling, and lay bleeding out on the floor. Cold and alone, without any hope of surviving at all. She'd watched her blood run across the tiles, and into the joins she hadn't even noticed were there. It had run outwards as a grid, revealing the path she should have taken, if she were to survive.

Then she'd heard the tinkle of silver bells, and a warmth encompassed her. She felt hands on her head, lifting her, and then she'd known. She knew that she was a prophet, and that Meria was choosing her.

That had been her first vision.

The visions were gone now. Her vision was gone. She was nearly there. A moment longer, and she'd be gone.

Alexus

She grabbed the hunk of table that had pierced her chest and tore it out, tossing it aside with a glare, watching as Dyys vanished. Her best friend had just been erased from existence for daring to approach the thing that was trying to kill them all.

It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, it wasn't just.

Alexus roared angrily, and she felt a bloodied hand touch her ankle weakly. She gasped as magic power she'd never known flowed into her. She looked down as Sarin's eyes fluttered shut. The goddess had given her all, her last, to her.

Alexus screamed as she held up her hand and something smashed out from it. It wasn't linear, it wasn't physical. She grabbed the threads of reality themselves, the dancing threads torn by the creature's attacks, and she bound them to herself. She wove herself into the fabric of the world, and twisted it. The winds in the dining hall faded, as she moved slowly and painfully across the ground.

She was dying. She could feel that. Touching reality like this wasn't possible. Shouldn't be possible.

But like Dyys before her, she was proving what a Fury really was. She was touching the divine.

The woman looked at her in surprise, and then she was in front of her, a fist swinging into her face.

Alexus fell back. She couldn't scream. She didn't have anything to scream with. She didn't have a skull, or a face or even a head. She was fading, held in place only by the threads of reality she'd grabbed.

Whoever this was... They were beyond anything Alexis had ever seen.

Dyys

She screamed in anger as she dragged the fragments of her broken body back together, reassembling herself.

The Fae who had attacked them was standing quietly, head bowed. Dyys went to attack her, and found she couldn't move. The Fae seemed to be praying, or spellcasting. Dyys fought it. She had managed to piece together this stupid fragile body, she should be able to break out of whatever spell was keeping her locked in place. Keeping her from avenging her master.

The woman sighed and turned, looking at her with tear-filled eyes, "Dyys. I'm so sorry. I never meant to hurt you."

She glared, "What are you?!"

"Me?" The woman shrugged, "I'm Ausosa. The Dawn of the Fae. Wife to Tyr, who was abused and murdered for the crime of wanting to survive. I was the first prisoner sent to the hells. Hero was given Yio's permission to enslave your people, so that you might become the ones who held me, for all eternity. You have had so many sins committed against you, Dyys. I didn't want to make it worse... But I have. I'm sorry. There's only one thing I can offer you."

Dyys looked in surprise as the woman dragged a man out of the crowd of bodies. He was coughing blood, too weak to resist, but still alive. Hero, despite all of this, was still alive.

Ausosa made him kneel in front of her, and Dyys felt the force controlling her disappear.

She glared at Hero, and then up at the woman who had murdered her master. "You think one justice forgives another?"

"No." Ausosa shook her head, "Not at all. I can offer you this. I can't let you kill me, not yet. I still have work to do. Trei escaped. He'll find his precious garden destroyed. He'll be coming for me, and soon. He might actually have a chance at undoing what I have done."

"You have the power to kill gods." Dyys winced, "Bring her back. Give her back to me!"

Ausosa winced, "I can't. I've tainted the lifestream, Dyys. No one can ever come back. Never again. Death is permanent, for everything, everywhere. It was the only way to stop the gods. The only way. Tyr tried it, and Trei killed him for it. But Tyr was right. We don't need the gods to dictate our lives."

Hero glared up at her, "Help me, Dyys. Help me destroy her. She's the evil."

Dyys slashed his throat without looking down. His death meant nothing to her. It was hollow. There was only one thing that mattered to her, and now it was gone. Bel was dead. Killed for the incredible sin of being invited to dinner. She wasn't a champion of the gods. Why did she have to die?

Ausosa walked over to her, and held out her hand.

Dyys glared at it. "I hate you. And I will hate you until the 'verse implodes."

The Fae smiled sadly, "That doesn't surprise me. I know what it's like to lose someone you love. I tried to bring him back. That was my sin, Dyys. The sin that had them commit me to hell for eternity. I spent millennia being tortured by you, and by the others. Because I loved them enough that I tried to bring him back. But a Fae can't be brought back. Not completely. So Tyr was trapped outside time, watching me being tortured by your kind."

"That doesn't justify it." Dyys hissed, "Nothing can justify what you've done!"

“You can hardly judge me, torturer.” The Fae shook her head, “How much guilt will you feel, when you finally dare to let yourself feel the truth? That you purified and obliterated souls to give that dead asshole power. That is the truth. You made him powerful. I brought him to his knees. Which of us should feel worse?”

Dyys clenched her fists and Ausosa rolled her eyes, “You’re just a lich. A fragment of a soul. You can’t ever hope to fight me, Dyys. Bury your love. For her sake, remember her.”

The Fae walked away.

Dyys fell to her knees, crying. It was over. It was all over. The Fae had walked in and killed all the gods. Killed Bel. There was no one who could stop her, not anymore.

The Fury could hear others crying, and she looked up in surprise. She wasn’t the only survivor.

She could see terrified sparks of healing magic that seemed to recoil and tear apart before the spells could fully form. A soldier leaned over one body, a shrouded mortal over another. Those were the only two other survivors that she could see.

Dyys punched the broken corpse in front of her angrily.

Sequel

The story of Trei and Ausosa will conclude in 'Summer Ashes'.

Summer Ashes

James Milne



Figure 3: Summer Ashes